THREE HUNDRED FEET AN HOUR

A NOVELLA OF THE SUPER INFLATABLE HEADGEAR OF MANHATTAN

THREE HUNDRED FEET AN HOUR

A NOVELLA OF THE SUPER INFLATABLE HEADGEAR OF MANHATTAN

IN THE VOICES OF SEVEN CHILDREN OF THE ISLAND

WITH THIRTY-FOUR PLATES

SURJAN

WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL

It is a feeling that somebody made big enough to walk into.

WREN CASTELLANOS, AGED TEN

If you are frightened, go outside, because it is better outside.

SIH-02, THE CRIER, OVER THE HARBOUR, 11 AUGUST, 09:00

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FOREWORD

BY SURJAN

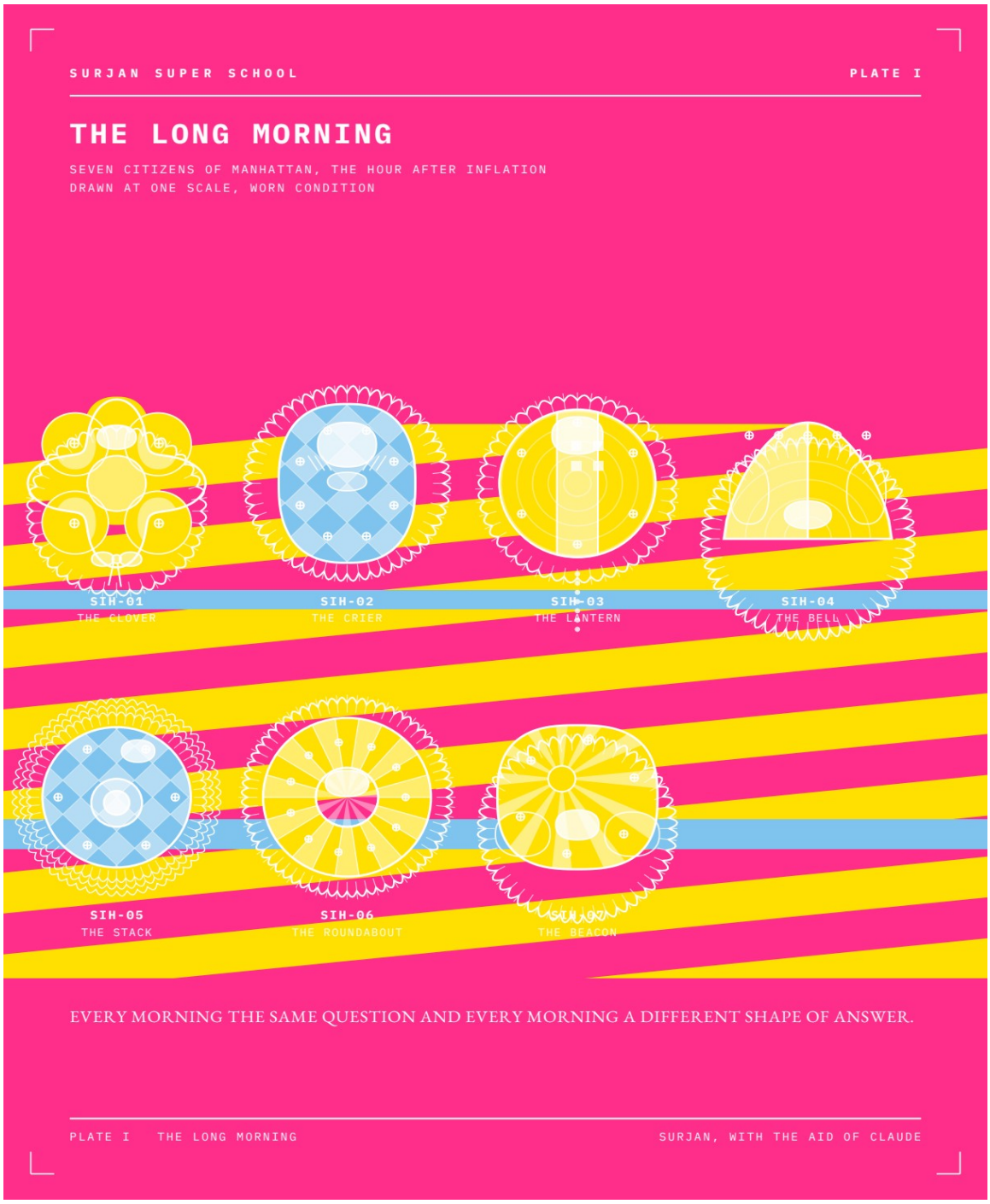


PLATE I — THE LONG MORNING. Seven citizens of Manhattan, the hour after inflation, drawn at one scale in the worn condition.

I did not invent the headgear. I want that on the first page, because everything after it depends on my having said it.

What I did was keep the records. For one summer I stood at the rail of the Christopher Street pier with a clipboard and a folding chair and I wrote down what floated past, and when what floated past turned out to be four hundred and forty feet across and full of music, I did not stop writing. That is the whole of my qualification.

The condition arrives in the small hours. A citizen wakes and the head has already begun: a lobe at the temple, a gore across the crown, a ruff gathering at the throat like weather gathering at a coast. It is not painful. Everyone I have interviewed says the same word for it, and the word is *warm*. By six in the morning the citizen cannot fit through an ordinary door, and by seven the citizen does not want to, because the street is better anyway and there is somebody at the corner in the same condition, waiting.

By noon a head may be the size of a room. By evening it may be moored off the shore of the island with two thousand people underneath it dancing. And in the morning it is gone, and the citizen walks home with a small head and a wet collar and nothing at all to show for it except that the whole neighbourhood slept well.

This book is written by the children who watched. I made that choice early and I have never regretted it. The adults I interviewed gave me policy. They gave me the word *permitting* and the word *liability*, and once, memorably, the phrase *unscheduled civic amenity*. The children gave me the truth, which was smaller and more accurate: that the Clover smells faintly of hot vinyl and cut grass; that the Bell is warmest on its pink side; that if you lie down under the Roundabout at four in the afternoon and look straight up, the twenty-two gores turn slowly whether or not there is any wind, and nobody has ever explained this and nobody has ever needed to.

Seven children kept notebooks. Seven agents kept the island. The two sets of seven are not related and I have resisted every temptation to pretend otherwise.

A word about the arrangement. The fragments are numbered because that is how they were written — on the back of a MetroCard receipt, in the margin of a summer reading list, on the inside cover of a library copy of a book about whales. I have not smoothed them. Where a child changes the subject in the middle of a sentence I have let the subject change. Where a child repeats a thing four times because it is the most important thing that has ever happened, I have let the thing be repeated four times.

A word about the plates. They are supergraphics, which is a technical term for colour used at the scale of a building so that the building can tell you how to behave. The method is not mine either; it belongs to a woman who painted a wall in Sonoma in 1966 so hard that the

corner of the room disappeared. I have used yellow, pink and sky, and white for the type, and no black anywhere, because at the size these things eventually reached, black would have been too heavy to lift.

A word about joy, since the subtitle promises it. I am aware that a book of undiluted happiness is a suspicious object. I have thought about this for a long time and I have arrived at the following: what is described in these pages is not the absence of the other thing. It is the other thing, inflated. Grief, turned inside out until it is convex, until it has a skin, until strangers can stand under it and be dry. That is the operation. It is architectural and it is public and it takes about forty-one minutes.

Read it in any order. The island is best read that way too.

INTRODUCTION

ON RADICAL JOY, AND WHY IT REQUIRES AIR

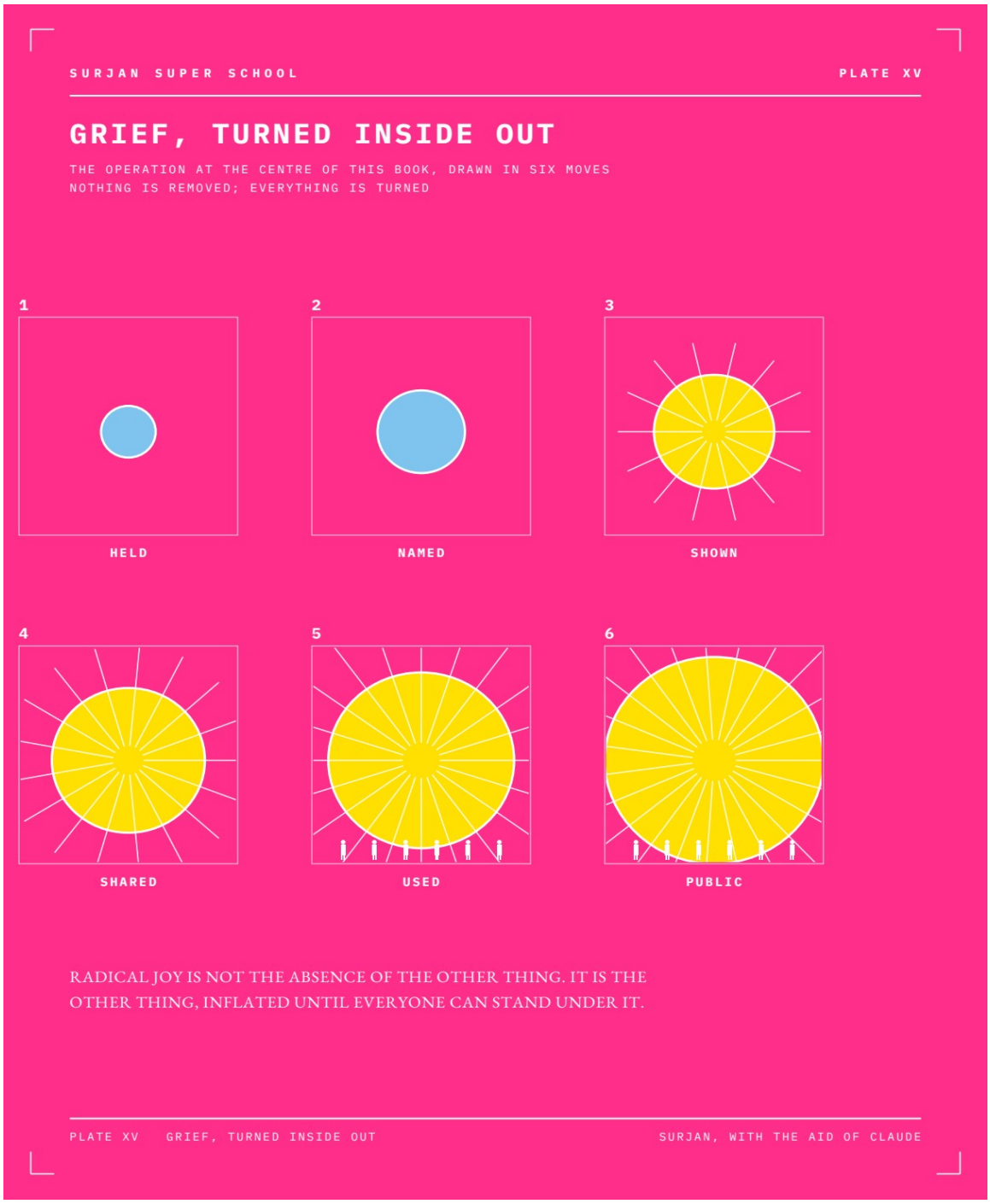


PLATE XV — GRIEF, TURNED INSIDE OUT. The operation at the centre of this book, drawn in six moves. Nothing is removed; everything is turned.

1.

There is a difference between a happy building and a building that makes happiness, and the difference is that the second one can fail. A mural cannot fail. A fountain can be turned off but it cannot deflate in front of you at nine minutes past nine while four hundred people say *ohhh* in one voice. The agents can. That is the source of everything they are worth.

2.

The old civic institutions of this island were built to outlast the people who paid for them, which is a form of insult, though a polite one. A library says: I will be here when you are not. A courthouse says the same with less charm. The agents say the opposite. They say: I will be here until the tide turns twice, and then I will be a wet collar on an esplanade, and if you want me again tomorrow somebody will have to wake up and want me.

That is a contract between a building and a citizen with the terms reversed, and I have watched an eleven-year-old understand it in under four seconds.

3.

I use the phrase *analogue connector* in the technical portions of this work, and I should explain it here where nothing technical is at stake.

An analogue connector is a thing that only works if the bodies are in the same place at the same hour. It cannot be streamed. It cannot be saved for later. It cannot be attended remotely, summarised, or clipped. If you were not standing under it you did not have it, and no amount of description afterwards will transfer the having.

This book is a description afterwards. I am aware of the contradiction. I have decided that a book which fails honestly at an impossible task is better than an accurate book about something that did not matter.

4.

Why air.

Because air is the only building material that is both free and shared. Stone belongs to whoever bought the quarry. Steel belongs to a mill in another state. But the air over Fourteenth Street on a Tuesday belongs to nobody and it is already there, in enormous quantities, doing nothing.

To make a room out of it you need three things: a skin, a difference in pressure, and somebody willing to keep breathing on your behalf. The third condition is the interesting one. A pneumatic structure is the only kind of architecture that dies the moment attention

stops. Everything else falls down slowly and out of spite. These come down in nineteen minutes and they come down because everyone agreed it was time.

5.

I have been asked whether the agents are metaphors. The question is usually put kindly and I have learned to answer it without heat.

No. They are 0.42 to 0.60 millimetres of thermoplastic polyurethane, radio-frequency welded on the bias, valved in cells, tethered where possible to something older than the tether. They have a mass. They displace water. They have insurance, though the policy is written in language that would embarrass a poet.

But they are also, obviously, a metaphor, in the way that anything sufficiently large and sufficiently pink becomes a metaphor whether or not it consents. I have not fought this. The children do not fight it either. Wren Castellanos, who was ten, wrote in her notebook: *it is a feeling that somebody made big enough to walk into.* I have never improved on that sentence and I have had several years to try.

6.

On conversation.

The agents speak to one another. This is the claim in this book that costs me the most credibility and it is the claim I am least willing to soften.

I have never heard it. Nobody has. There is no recording and there is no instrument that has caught it and I do not believe there ever will be. What there is, is this: at 15:03 on a Tuesday the Crier is moored at the UN slip, and at 15:41 the Stack — six miles north, in a creek, behind a bridge — leaves its berth and comes down the Harlem River at a speed it has never otherwise used, and at 17:00 they are side by side off Roosevelt Island and the whole East River is standing on the promenade with its shoes off.

Something was said. I decline to explain it further. The children never asked me to.

7.

On the growing.

In the third book of this volume the agents get out of hand, and I want to say now, before you reach it, that nothing bad happens. This surprises people. We are trained to read expansion as menace. A thing that covers an island must be a thing that has taken an island.

But nobody was taken. Everything underneath kept its own name and its own mayor. For nineteen hours the island was indoors, and the temperature was seventy-four degrees from

river to river, and there was no wind at street level except the wind the fans made, and one point six million people went about the day under a ceiling that had holes in it, and then at 23:59 every valve on the island opened at the same minute and it was over.

The only permanent consequence I have been able to document is that a generation of children now believe, in the part of the mind that does not argue, that weather is optional and that a city can decide to hold still for a while. I am not certain this is a harmless belief. I am certain it is a joyful one.

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
SUPER
INFLATABLE
HEADGEAR
A SUPERGRAPHIC ATLAS OF ANALOGUE CONNECTORS IN A DIGITAL AGE / THIRTY-FIVE PLATES
THE SHORELINE OF MANHATTAN / SEVEN AGENTS / TWELVE SPECULATIVE SET-DOWNS
PUBLISHED BY
SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
SURJAN, WITH THE AID
OF CLAUDE
NO BLACK IS USED IN
THIS VOLUME.

FROM THE FIRST ATLAS — SUPER INFLATABLE HEADGEAR. The survey volume from which the drawings in this book are taken.

8.

A note on the catalogue.

Thirty-four plates are bound into this volume. Sixteen were made for the book. Twelve are taken from the two atlases of the survey. Seven are photographs made on the mornings themselves, and I want to be direct about them: they are not illustrations. They are the primary documents. Everything drawn in this book was drawn from them.

9.

Finally, the title of the whole enterprise.

Radical joy is not a mood and it is certainly not optimism, which is a prediction and therefore a way of avoiding the present. Radical joy is a construction. It has a footprint, a program, a capacity, an occupancy load, a schedule of maintenance and an hour at which it ends.

You will find all of that in the pages after this one, together with a dog named Biscuit, a bollard from 1894, forty-one people who came to a block party that a child had drawn in advance, and seven citizens of this island who woke up one summer with something enormous and ridiculous on their heads and, instead of hiding, went outside.

— *S.*

BOOK ONE

THE SEVEN MORNINGS

Seven notebooks, kept between the fourth of July and the last week of August, in the voices of the children who kept them.

CHAPTER I

NOOR ABBASI, ELEVEN, OF INWOOD

SIH-07, THE BEACON. Morning condition, worn, photographed at Muscota Marsh. Twelve rays, applied not printed.

1.

The first one I ever saw was at the top of the island, where the ship canal is, where the water goes under the bridge and turns and the trains come out of the rock.

I was on the wooden walkway that goes over the marsh. It was six in the morning because my father starts at seven and I go with him as far as the station, and I am allowed to walk back alone if it is light, and in August at six it is light.

She came around the corner of the marsh with a sunburst on her head.

2.

I want to be precise about the size, because everybody I have told gets the size wrong in one direction or the other.

It was not the size of a house. It was the size of a chair, if the chair were made of one continuous cushion and were sitting on somebody's shoulders and had a hole in the front for the face.

Twelve yellow rays on a pink ground, coming out of a middle that was set a little to one side, the way the sun is set a little to one side in a drawing done fast.

3.

She said good morning.

I want that written down as the first fact of this book. Before anything grew, before anything covered anything, a woman with a sunburst on her head said good morning to a girl on a boardwalk, in a normal voice, the way you would if you were carrying groceries.

4.

I said good morning back. Then I said, *are you all right,* because that is what you say.

She said: *I am extremely all right.* And then she said the thing that made me start the notebook. She said, *do you want to see where I am going.*

5.

I did.

6.

There is a way the light comes into the ship canal in the early morning that everybody who lives up here knows about and nobody downtown believes. The rock on the Bronx side is grey and green and the water is brown and gold and there is a moment, about twenty minutes long, when the whole cut fills up like a glass.

She stood in the middle of it. The rays on her head caught the twenty minutes and held them.

7.

I asked what it was for.

She said it was not for anything yet. She said it would tell her by lunchtime.

8.

That is how they work, and I did not understand it that morning and I do understand it now: they do not have a purpose in the morning. The purpose arrives during the day, from outside, the way an idea arrives, and until it does the person just carries the shape around and lets it look at things.

9.

By eight o'clock there were four of us on the walkway: me, and the man who fishes and never catches, and two boys from the building on Payson who are older than me and pretended not to care.

By nine the shape was bigger. Not much. Maybe the size of a car that has been folded up.

By ten the two boys from Payson had stopped pretending.

10.

I asked her how it felt to get bigger and she said, *like being agreed with.*

11.

At noon it happened.

I am going to describe this carefully, because it is the part that people who were not there like to argue about, and I was there, and I have the sleeve of my shirt to prove it, which is still yellow at the cuff where I touched.

12.

She walked to the end of the little pier at Muscota, where the marsh grass is, and she said, *hold this, please,* and she gave the fishing man a ribbon.

Then she stepped off the pier.

13.

She did not fall in. That is the whole point.

The shape went down onto the water like a hand going down onto a table, and it kept going out, out past where she had been standing, and she was underneath it in the middle, and the marsh grass bent, and the whole thing settled and stopped and there was a building on the

ship canal where four seconds earlier there had been nothing but a woman in a wet-looking hat.

14.

The fishing man said a word I am not writing.

15.

It was about as long as our block. It had twelve rays on it and each ray was as wide as a car and there were people already walking underneath it, because the two boys from Payson had run under it immediately, which was, I think, the correct response, and I have thought about it a great deal since.

16.

Underneath it is warm and the light is yellow-pink and everything sounds like it does in a swimming pool but drier.

17.

The fishing man was still holding the ribbon. He held it all day. At six that evening I saw him standing in the same place with the ribbon in his fist, watching, and when I said hello he said, *she asked me to hold it,* as though I had accused him of something.

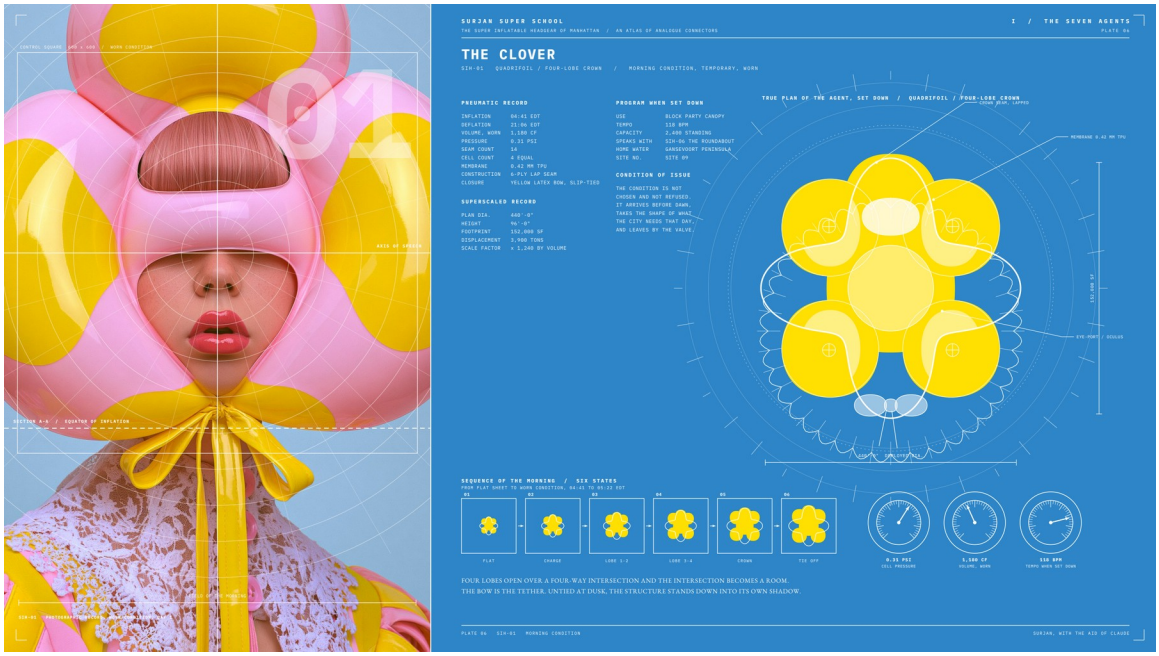
18.

Nobody had asked anybody for permission.

That is the second fact of this book and it is the one my father cannot get over. He has said, on eleven separate occasions, *but who allowed it,* and I have stopped answering, because the answer is nobody, and because the answer is also that at four in the afternoon my father was under it too, with his shoes off, holding a paper plate.

19.

There was a table by six. Nobody organised the table. Somebody brought a folding table and somebody else brought the thing you put on a table and by six there was a table.


SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
I / THE SEVEN AGENTS
THE CLOVER
PNEUMATIC RECORD
PROGRAM WHEN SET DOWN
CONDITION OF ISSUE
SUPERSCALED RECORD
TRUE PLAN OF THE AGENT, SET DOWN / QUADRIFOIL / FOUR-LOBE CROWN
SEQUENCE OF THE MORNING / SIX STATES
FOUR LOBES OPEN OVER A FOUR-WAY INTERSECTION AND THE INTERSECTION BECOMES A ROOM.
THE BOW IS THE TETHER. UNTIED AT DUSK, THE STRUCTURE STANDS DOWN INTO ITS OWN SHADOW.

FROM THE FIRST ATLAS — SIH-01 THE CLOVER, MORNING CONDITION. Pneumatic record, superscaled record, and the sequence of the morning in six states.

20.

I wrote down the food because I write down everything: rice with the crispy part, four kinds, from four buildings; a bucket of ice with cans in it; a cake somebody had bought for a different occasion and decided to reallocate; corn; a pot of black-eyed peas from the man on Seaman Avenue who does not talk to anybody, carried the whole way with a towel over it.

21.

The man on Seaman Avenue talked to everybody.

22.

At about eight the light went orange and the rays on the ceiling went orange with it and the whole underneath turned into the inside of a lamp, and everyone stopped talking at the same time without agreeing to, which I did not know a hundred people could do.

23.

Then a woman from the sixth floor started singing something in a language I do not know and somebody else came in underneath her in a different language, and it fit.

24.

I do not want to say the word *joy*, because at school we are told to find a better word than the first word.

I have looked for a better word all summer. There is no better word. Everything else is either smaller or a lie.

25.

At twenty to twelve she said, *all right,* to no one, and everybody understood, and the shoes came back on and the table folded and the ice went back into the buckets it came out of.

26.

The going down is slower than the coming up. I had expected it to go the other way.

It took nineteen minutes. It came down evenly, from the outside in, the way a wave goes back, and the last part to touch the ground was the middle with the hub in it, and by then she was standing up in the centre of it with the pink gathering around her shoulders, small again, ordinary again, an ordinary woman on a pier at midnight with a wet collar.

27.

The fishing man gave her back the ribbon.

28.

She said thank you and tied it around her wrist and walked off toward Seaman Avenue and that was the whole of the first day.

29.

I got home and my mother said, *where have you been,* and I said, *at the top of the island,* and she said, *doing what,* and I could not answer, and she looked at my face and did not ask again, and made me eggs at midnight, which she has never done before or since.

30.

I started the ledger the next morning. Seven columns for the days and one row for each of them, when I found out there were seven, which took until the ninth of August.

31.

If you want to know what I have learned from a summer of records, it is this: the shape is different every day, and the person is the same, and the second thing is stranger than the first.

32.

She is a nurse. She works nights at the hospital on Broadway. I found this out in September, in the ordinary way, standing behind her in the pharmacy.

She said, *hello, ledger.*

That is what she calls me. She has never called me anything else.

CHAPTER II

TEO VARGAS-LIN, NINE, OF CORLEARS HOOK

SIH-04, THE BELL. Morning condition, worn. Split pink and yellow on the vertical axis; the seam is the entry.

1.

I count things. That is what I do, that is what I have always done, and my sister says it is annoying and my grandmother says it is a gift, and both of them are correct.

So this chapter is going to have a lot of numbers in it, and if you do not like numbers you can skip to the part about the dog.

2.

Corlears Hook is where the river turns. Everybody says *the East River* like it is a river. It is not a river, it is a strait, which means the water goes both ways depending on the mood of the ocean, and my grandmother taught me this before I could read.

At the Hook the water turns and so does everything else. Sound turns. If somebody is shouting at the Williamsburg Bridge you hear it four seconds late and coming from the wrong direction.

3.

The Bell arrived on a Thursday at 11:42 in the morning. I know because I looked at the clock on the pole, and then at my own wrist, because they disagree by two minutes and I have never decided which one to believe.

4.

It was pink on the left and yellow on the right, straight down the middle, like a jawbreaker that has been cut with a knife.

The lady inside it had a white collar with a pink edge and she was walking like somebody carrying a full cup.

5.

Counting of that first hour:

Adults who pretended not to look: 22.

Adults who looked: 9.

Children who looked: all of them.

Dogs who barked: 1.

Dogs who did not bark and instead sat down facing it, which I think is more polite: 3.

6.

The dog that sat down was Biscuit, who belongs to the man with the cart. Biscuit sat down at 11:44 and did not move again until three in the afternoon, and when the Bell finally came down onto the esplanade Biscuit was directly underneath the middle of it, which means Biscuit chose the exact centre of a building four hours before the building existed.

I have thought about this more than anything else that happened this summer.

7.

The setting down at the Hook was not like the one my friend Noor describes at the top of the island. Hers went out flat like a hand. Ours went down like a bell, which is the whole reason for the name: a skirt that comes out and then hangs, so that underneath there is a rim and a middle, and the rim is dark-ish and cool and the middle is bright and tall.

8.

Measurements, from pacing, which my grandmother says is a real unit and school says is not:

Across the outside: 186 of my paces.

Across the bright middle: 61 of my paces.

Height of the rim where you go in: about two of my father.

Height in the middle: I cannot pace up.

9.

The seam is the door.

Where the pink and the yellow meet, the skin is doubled and there is a slit, and you walk in through the colour change. You go in pink and you come out yellow or the other way around, and the older kids started doing it deliberately, going in one way and out the other, over and over, until an adult said *that is enough,* which was, in my opinion, an incorrect thing to say.

10.

Nobody obeyed the adult. This is worth recording because it almost never happens. I would like to say something about it but I do not have the words yet, only the count: the adult said it four times, and then stopped, and then went in through the colour change herself.

11.

Inside a bell, sound does what it does in a bell.

If you clap once at the middle you get your clap back one and a half times, slightly later, slightly rounder. If sixty people clap the effect is not sixty times bigger, which is the part I got wrong in my prediction, it is about eleven times bigger and much softer, like the difference between hail and rain.

12.

At two o'clock somebody put a speaker on a milk crate and everything I have just written became irrelevant.

13.

I would like to talk about the tempo.

132 beats a minute. I counted it against my pulse and then against the clock on the pole. It stayed at 132 for four hours, and the songs changed, and the people changed, and the light changed, and the tempo did not, and at some point I realised the songs were being chosen to fit the building and not the other way around.

14.

My grandmother came at four with a chair.

She is seventy-nine and she does not go to things. She has not gone to a thing since my grandfather died, which was two years ago in March, and I have counted the number of times she has left the apartment for a reason that was not a doctor: eleven, in two years, and all eleven were the pharmacy.

She came with a chair. She set the chair down at the rim where it is cool. She sat in it for five hours and forty minutes.

15.

I did not talk to her about it. I brought her a plate at six.

16.

Here is the thing I want to say and I am not sure how to say it, so I will say it in the way I know.

When my grandfather died, everybody came to our apartment, and the apartment was too small, and it was August then too, and the air conditioner was broken, and there were fifty people in four rooms and we were all sad in a very small space and it was terrible in a way that nobody could fix by being kind.

The Bell is the same amount of people, and it is not too small.

That is all. That is the entire observation. I have turned it over many times.

17.

At nine o'clock a man I have never seen before asked my grandmother to dance and she said no.

At half past nine she got up and danced anyway, on her own, at the rim, three steps in each direction, with her hand on the back of the chair.

Count: three steps, four times, then sitting. Then, later, three steps, seven times.

18.

Biscuit did not move.

19.

At ten I asked the lady in the middle — you can go and talk to them, they can hear you, they answer, this surprises people — I asked her how she knew to come to the Hook.

She said, *because somebody asked.*

I said, *who,* and she said, *the one at Twentieth Street,* and I said, *when,* and she said, *this morning, before I was awake,* which does not make sense, and which I have written down exactly.

20.

The one at Twentieth Street is the Clover. I did not know that yet. I did not know there was more than one of them until the Saturday.

21.

At 23:14 the valve opened. Everybody knows the sound now. Then it was new, and about half the people made a noise, and the noise was *ohhh,* the way you do when a firework is over.

22.

It came down in nineteen minutes. The skirt went first, folding in on itself with a sound like a sail. The middle stayed up longest, which meant that for about two minutes there was a tall thin pink thing standing over the esplanade with everybody looking up at it, and then that came down too.

23.

Total time from first sighting to flat: 11 hours and 47 minutes.

24.

People stayed another hour after there was nothing there.

That is my favourite number in the whole notebook. Sixty-one minutes of people standing around on an esplanade in the dark, in the place where a building was, not leaving.

25.

Biscuit was the last to go.

26.

The lady rolled the skin up. It goes small — smaller than you would ever believe, about the size of a duffel bag, and she put it over her shoulder and went to catch the M14 like a person going home from a job.

27.

My grandmother has been out of the apartment nineteen times since. I have counted. Four were the pharmacy.

CHAPTER III

MIRA HOLLENBECK, THIRTEEN, OF NORTH COVE

SIH-03, THE LANTERN. Morning condition, worn. A single meridian band; the reflection of a window arrived in the skin and never left.

1.

I want to begin by saying that I did not believe in it.

I am thirteen and I have read a great deal about how people convince themselves of things, and when the first one came down the west side I stood on the balcony of my building with

my arms folded and I thought: this is a stunt, and somebody is paying for it, and in six weeks there will be a logo on it.

There has never been a logo on it. I am recording my error at the front, where it belongs.

2.

The Lantern is a sphere. Not a shape like a sphere: a sphere. Pink, with one yellow band running up over it from bottom to top, one seam, and in the pink there is a rectangle of lighter pink with a cross in it, which is a reflection of a window that is not there.

I have looked for the window. There is no window in the harbour at that angle. The reflection arrived from somewhere else and stayed.

3.

That is the sort of detail that makes me want to argue and there is no one to argue with.

4.

North Cove is a rectangle of water with buildings on three sides. Sailboats live there in the summer, which is a stupid sentence, but sailboats do live there, tied up all week doing nothing, waiting for a Saturday.

On the second of August at 19:40 the Lantern came into the cove and the sailboats had to be moved, and the moving of the sailboats was the first evidence I accepted, because nobody stages an inconvenience.

5.

It fit with eleven feet to spare on either hand. I have this number from the harbourmaster's office because I asked, in writing, and they answered, in writing, and I have kept the letter.

6.

The thing about a sphere at that size is that it does not look like an object. Objects have a top. A sphere the width of the cove has no top from anywhere you can stand, so what you see is a wall that curves out over you, and the curving out is what makes people put their hands over their mouths, which I observed in dozens and then, at 19:52, in myself.

7.

At dark the meridian lit.

Not lit like a screen. The band went from yellow to a yellow you could read a book by, and the light came out of the whole thickness of it, and the sphere went from being a thing in the water to being the only thing in the harbour.

New Jersey stopped. I mean that literally: the traffic on the far shore stopped, in both directions, and stayed stopped for about six minutes, and nobody in New Jersey has ever explained themselves.

8.

I have a list of the things I checked, because I checked them:

Whether it was inflated by a compressor on a barge: no barge.

Whether the light was projected from a boat: no boat, and the light moves with the skin when the skin moves, which projection does not do.

Whether anybody was collecting money: nobody was collecting money.

Whether there was a permit: I asked. The office said, and I am quoting the letter, *no application has been received.* The tone of the letter was not angry. I would describe the tone of the letter as tired and slightly amused.

9.

Somebody was inside it. That is the part I could not check and it is the part that turned out to matter.

10.

I got in on the fourth night, because by the fourth night there was a way in — a low place at the north edge where the skin comes down to the water and there is a pontoon, and a man in a yellow vest who was not employed by anyone and who had made himself responsible for the pontoon, which is a very Manhattan thing to do.

11.

Inside a sphere the size of a cove.

The floor is water and the water is calm because the wind cannot get in. The whole inside surface is faintly lit, pink, with the yellow band going up and over, so that when you lie back on a pontoon you are looking at a line of light that goes from the water in front of you to directly overhead and then away behind you and down into the water again.

I lay on my back on a pontoon in the middle of the North Cove for one hour and ten minutes, which is longer than I have ever done anything, and I did not think about anything at all, and I would like that on the record as well.

12.

She is a schoolteacher. Fourth grade, at the school on Chambers Street.

She was sitting on the edge of the pontoon with her shoes off, and I asked her the questions I had brought, and she answered all of them, and none of the answers were what I wanted, and by the end I had stopped wanting.

13.

I asked: how do you steer.

She said: you do not steer, you agree.

I asked: agree with what.

She said: with the water, mostly. And with the others, if they are talking.

14.

I asked whether it was frightening to become enormous.

She said the opposite was frightening. She said, and I wrote it down at the time: *I was enormous inside and small outside for thirty-one years and I would not go back to it for anything.*

15.

I asked what it was for.

She said, *for tonight.*

I said that was not an answer, and she said, *I know, isn't it good.*

16.

At 22:30 the projection started, which is the wrong word, and I do not have the right one.

The meridian band goes dark for a second and then it carries pictures. Not a film. Shapes, in yellow and pink, moving slowly, the size of a building: a circle that opens, a line that walks, seven little shapes in a row that go past each other and turn.

The whole harbour watched. Nobody knew what it meant. Everybody agreed it was the best thing they had ever seen, and I include myself, and I am the one who came with folded arms.

17.

I have since learned that the seven little shapes in a row are the other agents, and that this was a kind of roll call, and that on nights when one of them is not on the water its shape is left out, and there is a gap.

There was no gap that night. All seven were on the water. That was, I now know, unusual.

18.

Around midnight the harbour got busy in a way I have never seen. Every ferry that was still running came past slowly. Then the ones that were not running came past too. Then a fireboat, which turned on its water jets, which is not permitted for decoration.

19.

I would like to describe the sound a fireboat makes when it is being generous.

20.

I went home at 01:20 and I could not sleep and I did the only thing I know how to do when I cannot sleep, which is make a list, and this is the list I made:

Things I was wrong about: it is a stunt; someone is paying; there will be a logo; the adults are humouring us; it will happen once; it will get boring; I am too old for it.

Things I was right about: nothing.

21.

It has not got boring. That is the fifty-first day.

22.

I have gone every night that it has been in the cove. I take the letter from the harbourmaster's office with me, folded, in my back pocket, which is irrational.

23.

I asked her, on the ninth night, whether she was ever going to explain it.

She said: *would you rather have the explanation or the thing?*

I said the thing. I said it fast, before I could construct a better answer, and she laughed, and the laugh went all the way around the inside of the sphere and came back to us from behind, four seconds late, from the wrong direction, like everything else in this harbour.

CHAPTER IV

AUGUSTINE OKONKWO-REYES, TWELVE, OF WEST HARLEM

SIH-06, THE ROUNDABOUT. Morning condition, worn. Radial torus; twenty-two gores and an oculus that is always open.

1.

My name is Augustine and everyone calls me Augie except my grandmother and the Roundabout, who both use the whole thing.

2.

I am the one who talks to them. Other people have said this about me as though it were a talent. It is not a talent. It is only that I asked, on the first day, and nobody else did, and then it was mine.

3.

The Roundabout is a ring. It has a hole in the middle and the hole never closes.

Twenty-two gores, alternating, pink and yellow, going around like the seats of a carousel. When it is small it sits on the shoulders like a life ring that somebody has been thrown and then decided to wear. When it is large it is a promenade, and the hole in the middle is a piece of sky with a ring of building around it.

4.

The others have a middle. She does not. She has a middle that is missing on purpose, and out of the seven of them she is the only one you can stand inside and still get rained on.

5.

At the piers at 125th Street the river is very wide and the bridge is very high and there is a place where the viaduct comes down and the old rails are still in the pavement. That is where she likes to be. I say *likes* because I asked and she said yes.

6.

The first time I talked to her I said, *excuse me.* I was raised properly.

She said, *Augustine.* She had never met me. I have asked her about this eight times and she has never given the same answer twice, and the answers are:

Because you look like an Augustine.

Because somebody said your name this morning and it was still in the air.

Because I was told.

Because it is a good name and I wanted to use it.

Because you are the one who was going to ask.

Because.

Because.

Because.

7.

The eighth time she said *because* she laughed, and I laughed, and that was the end of the questioning.

8.

Here is what talking to one of them is actually like, since everyone wants to know and nobody believes me.

You stand under the edge. You say the thing. There is a pause about as long as it takes a slow person to think, and then the answer comes, and the answer comes from the direction you are not looking in.

The voice is a voice. It is not booming. It is not in your head. If you have your hand on the skin you can feel the words coming through the skin one half second before you hear them, like thunder in the wrong order.

9.

They will not answer:

What is it for.

How long will you stay.

Are you a person.

What happens to the rest of us.

They will answer:

Are you warm.

Who else is on the water tonight.

What is that boy's dog called.

Do you want to know a thing about the bridge.

10.

I did want to know a thing about the bridge.

She said: at the top of each tower there is a place where the wind changes its mind, and if you put something up there that has any give in it at all, it will lean north for three seconds and then south for three seconds, all day, all year, for as long as the tower stands.

I said: how do you know.

She said: because I have been up there.

11.

The turning.

At the piers, from about four in the afternoon, the whole ring turns. Slowly — you have to watch a gore against a fixed thing to be sure — a full circle in something like eleven minutes.

There is no wind on most of those days. I checked with the flag on the sailing school. Flag limp, ring turning.

12.

I asked her about it once and she said, *would you rather have the explanation or the turning,* which is what they all say, and which I think they must have agreed on beforehand.

13.

The best hour of my life took place in the third week of July and I would like to describe it in order.

14.

At four the ring came in and set down over the old rails so the rails ran under the pink part and out the other side.

At half past four the kids from the pool came over still wet.

At five the ice cream man moved his whole cart three hundred feet, which I had not known was possible.

At half past five the man who plays the horn under the viaduct, who plays for nobody every single day, came and stood at the edge and did not play.

At six the ring said, *go on then.*

He played from six until twenty past nine.

15.

Twenty-two gores. Twenty-two panels of colour going around a hole full of sky, turning at eleven minutes to the circle, with a horn player under them who never had an audience in his life and now had four hundred people and a building that turned in time.

16.

I went and stood in the oculus. The rain had started, lightly, the way it does in July when nobody minds.

You stand in the middle where the hole is and you get rained on, and eight feet away, under the ring, there are people staying dry, and you can look at them and they can look at you and everybody is grinning like an idiot because of how ridiculous it is.

17.

She said: *this is the only room in the city with weather in it.*

18.

My grandmother says a thing about my grandfather, who I never met, which is that he came from a place where the rain was a guest and here the rain is a problem, and she has been trying to explain the difference to me my whole life.

I understood it in the oculus in nine seconds.

19.

I told the Roundabout this. It is the only time I ever saw one of them go quiet.

Then she said: *tell your grandmother the ring is here on Thursdays.*

20.

My grandmother came on the Thursday.

She did not go into the oculus, because she has a hip. She sat at the edge under the pink with her hand flat on the skin, feeling the words come through half a second early all evening, and she said, at the end, in the voice she uses for facts, *this is a good country.*

21.

I have thought about whether to include that sentence. It is not the kind of thing that goes in a book about a balloon. But she said it, and I write down what is said, and she said it with her hand on the skin.

22.

There is one more thing about the Roundabout, and it is the thing I have not told anyone until now.

23.

She is the one who talks to the others the most. I know this because she tells me who she has been talking to, in the way you would mention a phone call.

The Lantern is coming up on Friday.

The Bell has gone to the Hook because somebody there needed it, and I asked her to.

The Beacon is at the top and is being stubborn.

24.

I said: what do you say to each other.

She said: mostly where to be.

I said: is that all.

She said: Augustine, that is not a small thing. Do you know how much of being alive is deciding where to be.

25.

I said no.

She said: all of it. It is all of it.

26.

On the last Thursday in August she said something else, which I did not understand at the time, and which I am now writing down because Surjan asked me to write down everything even if I did not understand it.

She said: *we have been talking about growing.*

I said, you grow every day.

She said: *not like this.*

27.

Then she turned for eleven minutes, and the horn player played, and it rained in the middle and not at the edges, and I did not think about the sentence again until the eleventh of August.

CHAPTER V

SASKIA PEEL, EIGHT, OF STUYVESANT COVE

SIH-01, THE CLOVER. Morning condition, worn. Four lobes and a slip-tied bow; the bow is the tether.

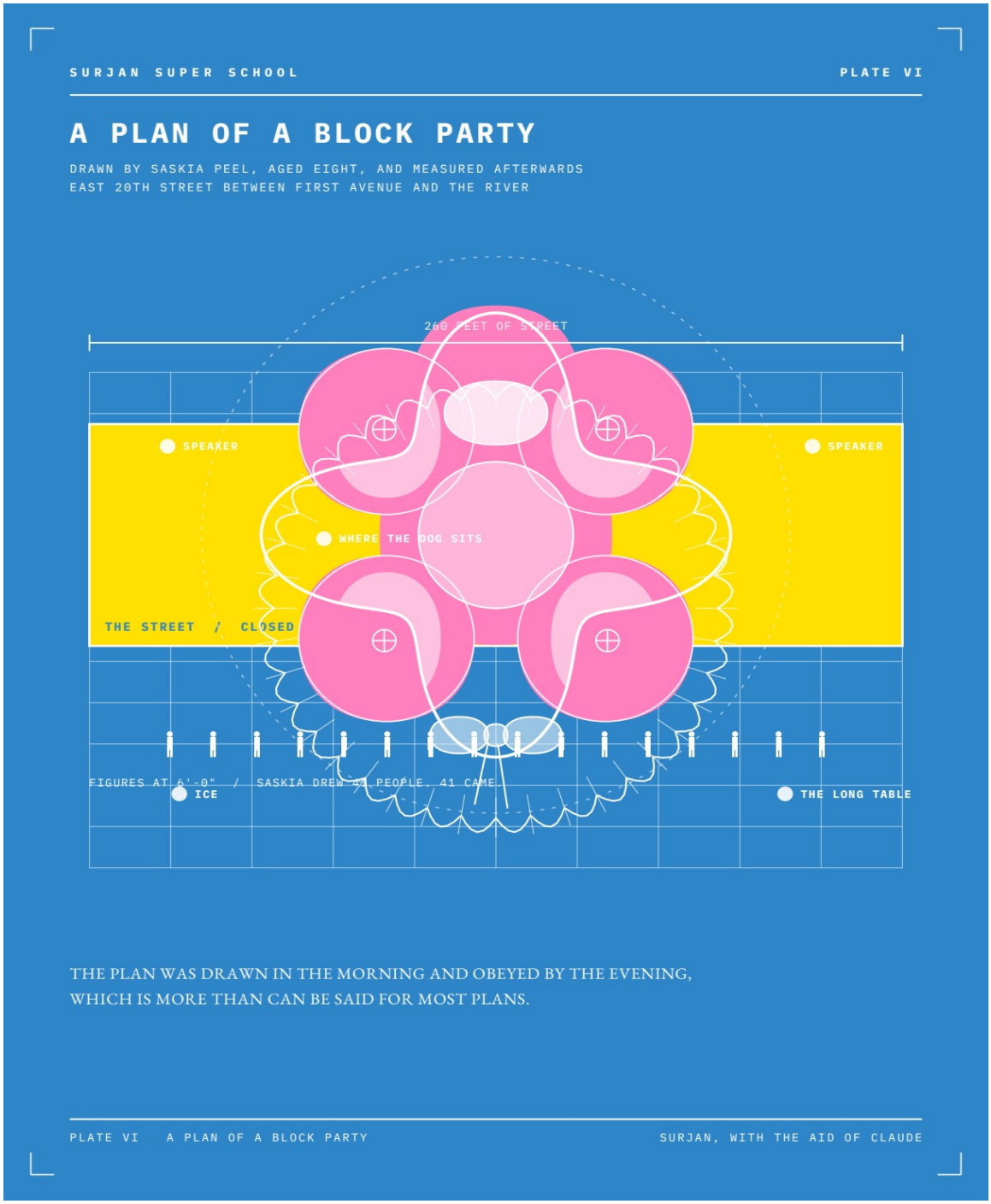

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
PLATE VI
A PLAN OF A BLOCK PARTY
DRAWN BY SASKIA PEEL, AGED EIGHT, AND MEASURED AFTERWARDS
EAST 20TH STREET BETWEEN FIRST AVENUE AND THE RIVER
260 FEET OF STREET
SPEAKER
SPEAKER
WHERE THE DOG SITS
THE STREET / CLOSED
FIGURES AT 6'-0" / SASKIA DREW 42 PEOPLE. 41 CAME.
ICE
THE LONG TABLE
THE PLAN WAS DRAWN IN THE MORNING AND OBEYED BY THE EVENING,
WHICH IS MORE THAN CAN BE SAID FOR MOST PLANS.
PLATE VI A PLAN OF A BLOCK PARTY
SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

PLATE VI — A PLAN OF A BLOCK PARTY. Drawn by Saskia Peel, aged eight, and measured afterwards.

1.

I drew it first and then it happened. That is the whole story and everyone makes it complicated.

2 .

I am eight. I draw plans. Not pictures — plans, from the top, the way a bird would see it if the bird were exactly above and not moving.

I have drawn: our apartment, the school, the playground with the sprinkler, the F train, the inside of my grandmother's bag, and East Twentieth Street between First Avenue and the water, which is the one that came true.

3 .

I drew it on a Tuesday, in the afternoon, on the back of a piece of paper from school that had a spelling test on the other side which I got fourteen out of fifteen on.

In the plan I put:

The street with a line across it where it is closed.

A big round thing in the middle with four bumps.

Speakers at both ends.

Ice at the top corner.

A long table down the side, which I drew as a long rectangle with legs, which is not how you draw a table from the top, but I wanted the legs.

A dot for where the dog would sit.

Forty-one people.

4 .

I counted the people afterwards because my brother said *you cannot know that,* and I do know it, because I drew forty-one and I coloured all of their shirts and I know how long forty-one takes.

5 .

On the Thursday the Clover came to Stuyvesant Cove and the street was closed and there was a big round thing in the middle with four bumps.

6 .

I do not think I made it happen. I want to say that because my brother has been telling people I said that and I did not say it.

What I think is: I drew what the street wanted, and then the street got it, and both of those are the same street being obvious.

7.

The Clover is my favourite and I am allowed to have a favourite.

Four lobes, like a flower for a very large baby, pink with a yellow patch on each lobe, and a bow at the throat, a real bow, yellow, tied the way you tie a shoe. The lady wears the bow like a ribbon and when the Clover is big the bow is as thick as a bus and it is tied to a metal post on the esplanade that has been there since before my grandmother, and it is tied in the same knot, only enormous.

8.

I asked her why she ties it to the post.

She said, *so I come back to this exact piece of the island.*

9.

That is the best sentence anybody said to me all summer and I have written it on the inside of my closet door where nobody looks.

10.

The block party.

The street closed itself. I know how that sounds. What happened is that a car came down and stopped and the man got out and looked and then reversed all the way back up to First Avenue and parked and came back on foot with a chair. And then everybody after him did the same.

11.

The four lobes came down over the intersection, one lobe on each corner, and the middle over the crossing, so that the crossing was a room with four doorways and each doorway was the beginning of a street.

You could stand in the middle and look down four streets at once and every one of them had people coming along it.

12.

Things that happened that I put in the plan:

The ice was at the top corner: yes.

The speakers were at both ends: yes.

The long table: yes, and it was longer than I drew.

The dog sat at the dot: this is the one everybody argues about. My brother says the dot is not in the same place. I have put the plan against a photograph and the dot is in the same place. Biscuit came all the way from Corlears Hook, which is nineteen blocks, and sat on the dot.

Things that happened that I did not put in the plan:

A cake with a name on it that was not anybody's name at the party.

Two men who had not spoken for eleven years, which I only know because everybody kept saying it in a whisper, and who were seen at the ice at the same time and did not fight.

The rain at half past eight that lasted four minutes and did not come inside.

A baby who was asleep the entire time and slept through everything, and whose mother slept as well, sitting up, for two hours, while other people watched the baby.

13.

I have made a rule for myself. When something happens that I did not draw, I write it in a different colour on the same plan.

The plan is now mostly the different colour.

14.

At the middle of the Clover there is an oculus like the Roundabout has but small, only as big as our classroom, and at nine o'clock somebody put a light through it from above — I do not know how — and there was a circle of light on the crossing.

Everybody stood in the circle in turns. There was no rule about it. A man sang in the circle. Two girls from my class did the whole dance from the video in the circle and everybody clapped so hard the girls got shy, which never happens to those two.

15.

I stood in it. I did not do anything. I just stood in it for a while and then came out.

16.

The lady with the Clover works at the desk in the building on Twenty-Third Street where you have to sign in. I have seen her there in the winter. She has a plant on the desk.

I said hello and she said hello and neither of us said the other thing, because there were people in the lobby, and because it is not a secret but it is not a lobby thing.

17.

At ten thirty she untied the bow.

You have to untie the bow before you let the air out. That is the rule with the Clover. It is not a safety rule, I asked, it is just how she does it.

She unties it and the four lobes let go one at a time, and the last one down is the one over the ice, and then everybody claps, and then it is a Thursday again.

18.

What I have decided, and I am eight, so I am allowed to decide things and change them later:

I have decided that a plan is a wish that you have done the arithmetic for.

19.

I am going to keep drawing them. I have started one for the whole island, which is very big and I am doing it in sections on the paper from school, and when it is finished I am going to give it to Surjan for the book, and Surjan says it will not fit in the book, and I have said that then the book is the wrong size.

CHAPTER VI

BENEDIKT NAVARRO, FIFTEEN, OF SHERMAN CREEK

SIH-05, THE STACK. Morning condition, worn. Harlequin gores over the drum, and the chimney that clears the weather.

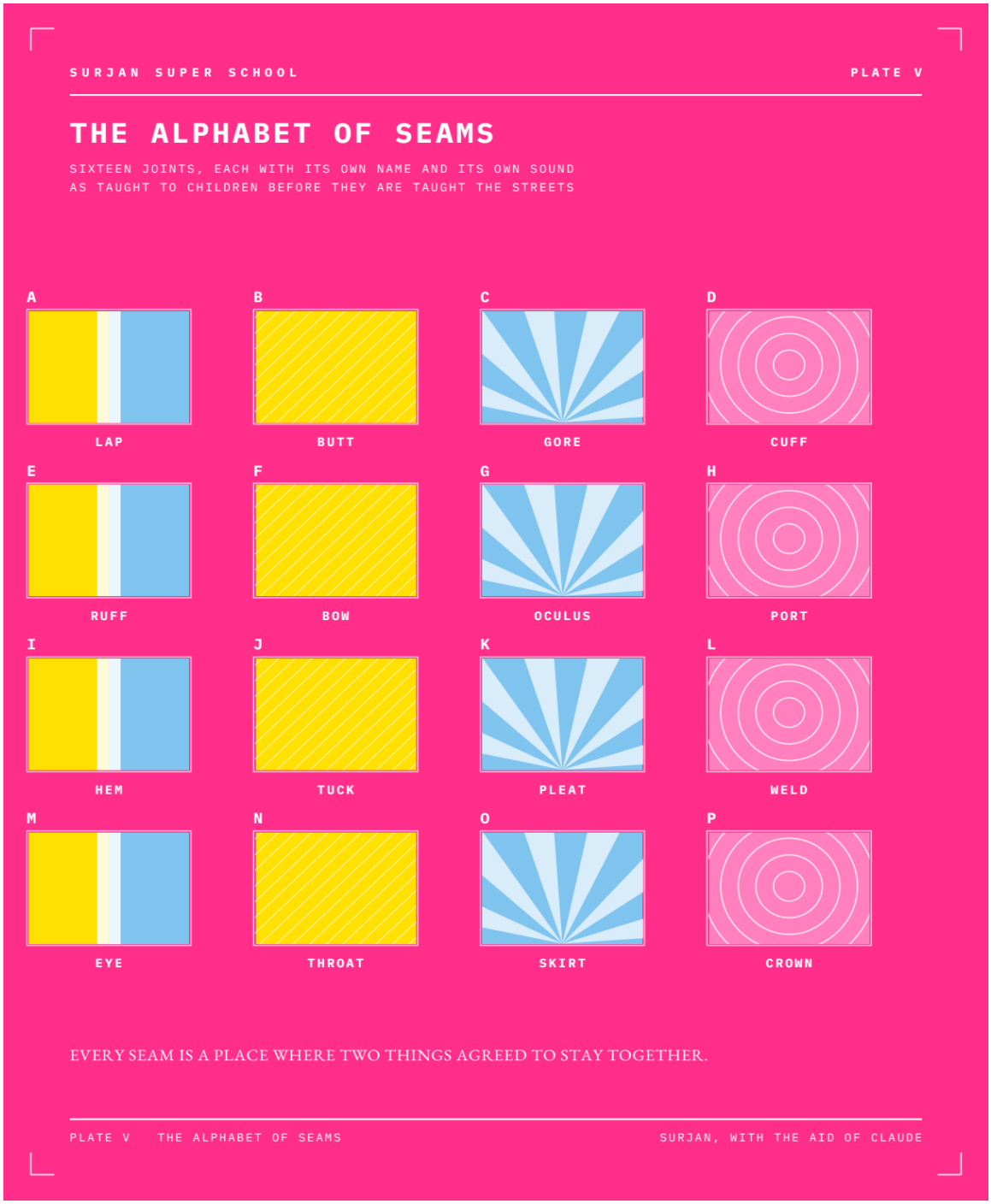


PLATE V — THE ALPHABET OF SEAMS. Sixteen joints, each with its own name and its own sound.

1.

I am the archivist. Nobody appointed me. I appointed me, in the second week, when it became obvious that the adults were going to remember this wrong.

2.

My method: date, time, location, agent, condition, weather, persons present (estimate), music (if any), duration, and one line of description which I try to keep free of adjectives and never entirely succeed.

I have four hundred and twelve entries. This chapter is thirty of them, plus what I think.

3.

I live at Sherman Creek, which is not a place most people can find. It is a piece of water off the Harlem River with a boathouse and a cove and grass that comes down to the edge, and behind it there is the hill and above the hill there is the rest of the world.

4.

The Stack chose us. I want to be careful there: I do not know that it chose us, I know that it comes here more than anywhere else, forty-one times by my count against nineteen for its next favourite, and forty-one against nineteen is not an accident.

5.

Entry 006. 12 July, 05:33, Sherman Creek. SIH-05. Worn condition. Clear, wind NW 6 mph. Persons present: 3 (self, boathouse volunteer, one runner who stopped). No music. Duration of observation 41 min. The chimney is not decorative; air leaves through it and you can feel the column of it four feet away.

6.

The Stack is the strangest of them and I say that as its neighbour and defender.

It is a drum with diamond gores, pink and yellow, laid on the bias, and out of the top of the drum comes a chimney, straight up, half again as tall as the drum itself. When it is worn, the chimney is a stovepipe hat that has had ideas. When it is set down, the chimney is a tower with an open throat and the sound goes up it and comes out at the top and gets thrown at the weather.

7.

Also: the eye-port is offset. All the others look straight ahead. The Stack looks slightly to starboard, which means downstream, which means she can only see where she is going if she is going the right way.

I have asked about this. The answer was: *I navigate by conversation, not by sight.* I recorded it as given.

8.

Entry 031. 19 July, 20:15. Sherman Creek. SIH-05 set down at the cove mouth. Persons present: approx. 240. Music: none for the first hour, then a brass band from the school on Dyckman, unrehearsed, arriving in pieces as members finished dinner.

Note: at 21:40 the sound went up the stack and came back off the underside of the High Bridge and returned to the cove approximately eight seconds late. Nobody stopped playing. They played *with* the echo. By 22:00 the band had rearranged itself so that the echo was part of the arrangement. I do not have the vocabulary for what this did to people. Estimate of persons crying: 30 to 40. Estimate of persons crying who would describe themselves as happy: all of them.

9.

I want to make an argument here and I will make it once and then go back to entries.

The argument is this: these are not events. Events have organisers, and the organisers are what everyone thanks at the end. These have no organisers. They have participants who arrive with equipment.

Which means the whole thing runs on the assumption that if you show up with a trumpet, somebody else will show up with a drum. That assumption is either the most naive thing in the city or the most sophisticated, and I have gone back and forth all summer, and I have landed on sophisticated, because it keeps working.

10.

Entry 044. 22 July. First recorded conversation between agents at Sherman Creek, or rather the first I could document from both ends.

15:03 — SIH-02 (the Crier) at the UN slip, per M. Hollenbeck, who I have made my correspondent downtown.

15:41 — SIH-05 leaves the cove at speed. I timed it: from the cove mouth to under the Broadway Bridge in 14 minutes, which is roughly three times its normal rate.

17:00 — SIH-02 and SIH-05 side by side off Roosevelt Island, per multiple sources.

Nothing was heard at either end. Something crossed the six miles between them in the thirty-eight minutes between 15:03 and 15:41 and I would give a year of my life to know what it was.

11.

Entry 058. 26 July. Weather: heavy rain, 1.4 inches in three hours.

The Stack stayed up. Persons present dropped to 60 and then rose again to 300. The rain came down the outside of the drum in sheets and went into the river and under the drum it was dry and 74 degrees and somebody had brought a folding table for chess.

Fourteen games of chess were played inside a balloon in a rainstorm on the Harlem River. I have the names of eleven of the fourteen winners. This is the sort of record that will matter in fifty years and that nobody but me is keeping.

12.

Entry 067. 29 July. A thing I did not expect to write.

The Stack asked me a question.

They ask questions all the time — are you warm, who is on the water — but this one was different. It said: *what are you writing down.*

I said, everything.

It said: *why.*

I said, because it will be gone.

It said: *good.*

13.

I have thought about *good* for a month.

I have decided it did not mean *good, it will be gone.* I have decided it meant *good, you have understood the terms.*

14.

Entry 081. 2 August. The Stack under the bridge at slack water, which is the only time it fits.

The Harlem River at slack water is the flattest water in the city, and the Stack came under the bridge with eleven feet of clearance and did not touch, and about two hundred of us stood on the walkway above and watched the top of the chimney go by underneath us close enough to put your hand on, and about forty people did put their hands on it, and I was one of them.

It is warm. That is the thing nobody tells you. It is body-warm, the whole surface, everywhere, all the time.

15.

Entry 090. 5 August. Persons present: 1.

Nobody came. It was a Wednesday and it was ninety-four degrees and there was a thing on television, and the Stack set down at the cove at seven in the evening and there was me and a boathouse volunteer who left at half past.

I stayed for four hours. It played nothing. I did not talk to it. It did not talk to me. We sat there, an enormous pink and yellow drum with a chimney and a fifteen-year-old with a notebook, in a cove nobody can find, on a Wednesday.

At 23:10 it deflated and I helped roll it, which takes two people and forty minutes, and neither of us said anything the entire time.

16.

That is the entry I would save if I could only save one.

17.

Entry 112. 9 August. The word *growing* used for the first time in my hearing.

I was rolling the skin with her — she is a hospital porter, she does the seven-to-seven, she has a bad shoulder and will not admit it — and she said, out of nothing:

We are talking about doing something large.

I said, larger than this?

She said: *the whole thing. All of it. Once.*

I asked when.

She said: *when the tide is right and everybody agrees. It has to be everybody.*

18.

I wrote it down in the margin because I did not have the notebook open, and the margin is the margin of a school reading list, and the words are between *chapters 4–7* and *bring a pencil.*

19.

Two days later it happened.

20.

That is the last entry in this chapter, because the rest belongs to the third book, and Surjan has asked us to keep the order.

CHAPTER VII

WREN CASTELLANOS, TEN, OF THE BATTERY

SIH-02, THE CRIER. Morning condition, worn. Harlequin ovoid with a speaking pod; the lashes are drawn on by hand each morning.

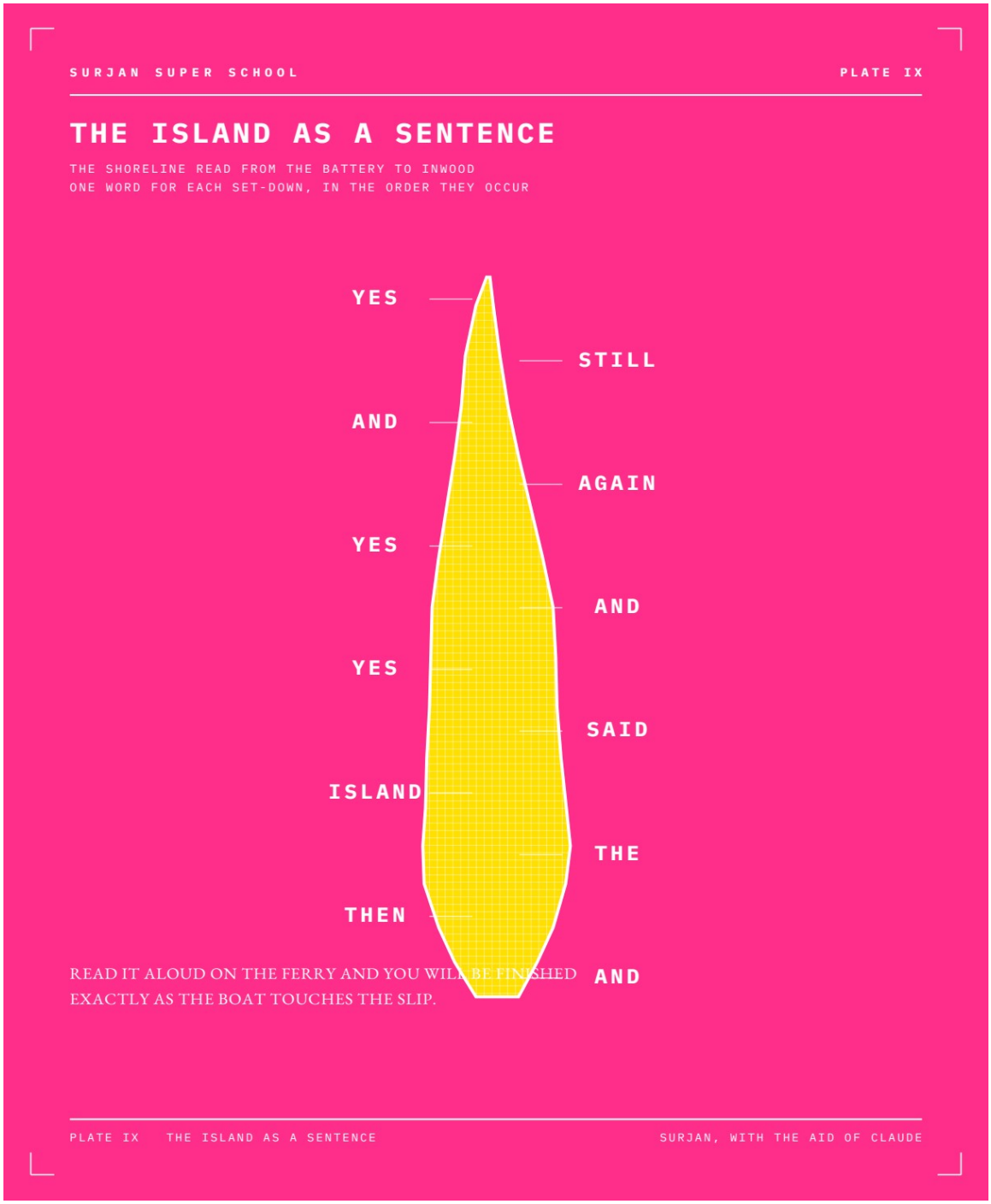


PLATE IX — THE ISLAND AS A SENTENCE. The shoreline read from the Battery to Inwood, one word for each set-down.

1.

I ride the ferry. Not to anywhere. I ride it because it is free and because at the Battery the boat comes in every half hour and my mother works at the terminal and I am allowed.

I have crossed the harbour, at my best estimate, one thousand and forty times, and I have never once got off at the other end for a reason.

2.

So when the agents began to move around the island, I was already an expert on the only thing that mattered, which is: what things look like from the water.

3.

Nobody else knows this. From the water the island is not a place, it is a sentence, and the buildings are the letters, and the letters are too close together to read.

The agents are the spaces between the words. That is what they did. They put spaces in.

4.

The Crier is the loudest of them and the one children are most afraid of at first, and I would like to fix that here, because it is not fair.

She is an egg. Diamond gores all over, pink and yellow, and hanging from the front, at the level where your chin would be, there is a pod, a pink pod like a second smaller head, and that is where the voice comes out.

And above the eye slot there are lashes. Drawn on. With a pen. Every morning, by hand, badly, on purpose.

5.

I asked why the lashes are crooked.

She said: *because a face that is too good is a face nobody talks to.*

6.

The first time she spoke over the harbour I was on the 11:30 boat and we were about halfway and the whole boat felt it before we heard it.

You feel it in the deck. Then the sound comes and it is not loud in the ear, it is loud in the chest, and everyone on the boat looked at each other with their hands flat on the rail, laughing, in the way that people laugh when they are slightly frightened and have decided quickly not to be.

7.

She was at the UN slip, six miles north, and we heard her at the Battery.

8.

What she says is mostly nothing. I want that written down clearly because there are people saying she gives instructions and she does not.

She says the sort of thing you would say from a window to a street:

Good morning. It is going to be very hot and there is water at the ferry building.

Somebody has lost a small blue bicycle at Twenty-Third Street.

The Roundabout will be at the piers this afternoon, which most of you already know.

Do not swim near the Bell when it is setting down. It looks like a good idea and it is not.

There is nothing else. Have your day.

9.

Have your day is how she ends. Always. It is not *have a good day.* It is *have your day,* which is different and which everybody in this city has now started saying, including my mother, including the man at the terminal who is not friendly.

10.

At the Battery on the twelfth of August all seven of them were in the harbour at once, and I was on the water for it, and I am the only one of the seven of us writing this book who was.

11.

I will do it in order because that is the only way I can.

12.

The Beacon came down from the top of the island in the morning and I did not see that part, I only heard about it from Noor.

The Roundabout came down the Hudson at about one o'clock, turning the whole way. From the boat it looked like a coin rolling on its edge, except pink, except silent, except the size of eleven buildings.

The Lantern came out of North Cove at two and the sailboats had to be moved again and everybody at the marina had known since Tuesday and had moved them in advance, which I think is the most Manhattan thing that happened all summer.

13.

The Clover came down the west side at three with its bow untied and streaming behind it, two yellow ribbons a hundred feet long, and there were people on every pier the whole way down doing the thing where you hold up your arms.

14.

The Bell came around from the Hook.

The Stack came down the East River and under the bridges, and at each bridge it had to wait for the water to go flat, so it came down in stages, and the crowds moved down the FDR with it, on foot, from bridge to bridge, which took four hours and which people have described to me as the best walk of their lives.

15.

The Crier came last, from the UN slip, and she came slowly, and she did not say anything the entire way down, which everybody noticed, and which everybody agreed was correct.

16.

At the Battery, at seven in the evening, seven of them were in the water in a rough ring, off the seawall, from Pier A around to the ferry slips.

Somebody said, *this has never happened,* and somebody else said, *it has never happened yet,* which I liked better.

17.

They did not do anything for about an hour.

That is the part I want to put in the book. There was no display. There was no music at first. Seven enormous pink and yellow shapes floated in the harbour of the greatest city in the world for one hour, and about forty thousand people watched them not doing anything, and nobody left.

18.

I was on the 19:30 boat, which went out and came back, and the captain took it slow both ways, and nobody complained, and the captain has been doing this route for twenty-six years and my mother says she has never seen him take it slow.

19.

At eight o'clock the Lantern lit its meridian and the other six went, in turn, from being shapes to being lamps, not all at once, one after another, going around the ring, and the sound the crowd made was not a cheer.

I have thought about how to describe the sound. It was the sound forty thousand people make when they have decided at the same instant not to cheer, because cheering would be too small.

20.

Then the Crier spoke, once, over the whole harbour, and this is the only time all summer I have written down her words exactly, and I checked them with three adults on the boat and we agree:

We are going to try something on the eleventh. Nobody has to do anything. Just be outside.

21.

That is all she said. Then she said, *have your day,* even though it was night, and everybody laughed, and that broke it, and after that there was music until two in the morning.

22.

On the way back in on the last boat I stood at the rail at the front where you are not supposed to stand, and my mother let me, and we went in past the seven of them lit up in a ring, and the wake went out from the boat and under them and made all seven of them move very slightly, together, at the same time, the way a room of people breathes when a film is good.

23.

I am ten. I know what I saw.

24.

The eleventh of August is the next book.

BOOK TWO

THE CONVERSATIONS

In which the seven speak to one another, and the island reorganises itself twice daily around what was said.

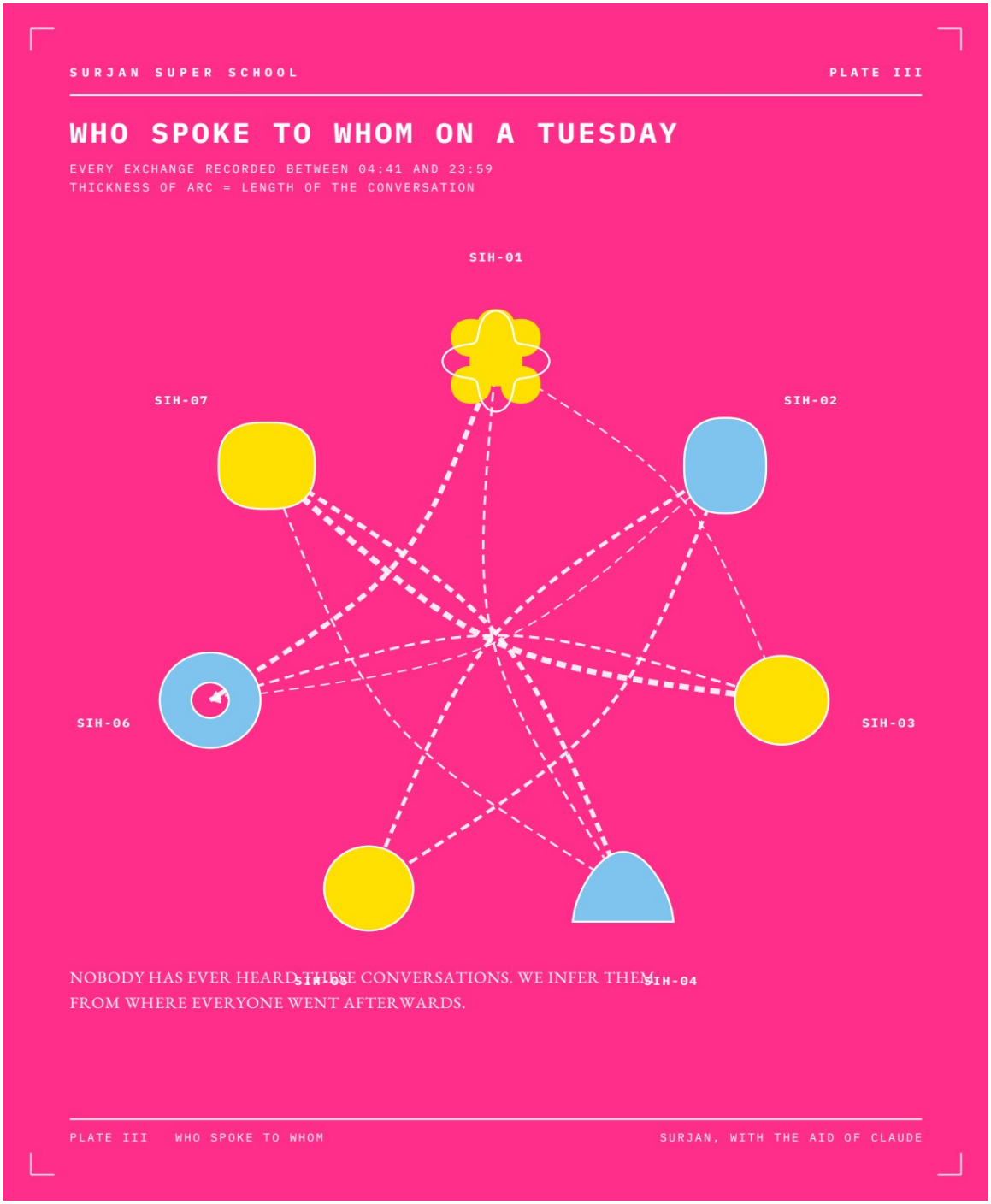

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
PLATE III
WHO SPOKE TO WHOM ON A TUESDAY
EVERY EXCHANGE RECORDED BETWEEN 04:41 AND 23:59
THICKNESS OF ARC = LENGTH OF THE CONVERSATION
SIH-01
SIH-02
SIH-03
SIH-04
SIH-05
SIH-06
SIH-07
NOBODY HAS EVER HEARD THESE CONVERSATIONS. WE INFER THEM FROM WHERE EVERYONE WENT AFTERWARDS.
PLATE III WHO SPOKE TO WHOM
SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

PLATE III — WHO SPOKE TO WHOM ON A TUESDAY. Every exchange recorded between 04:41 and 23:59; thickness of arc is the length of the conversation.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST CONVERSATION

AUGUSTINE OKONKWO-REYES

1.

The first one anybody caught was between the Clover and the Roundabout, and I caught it, and I did not understand what I had.

2.

It was the eleventh of July, a Tuesday, at the piers. The Roundabout was set down over the old rails and had been since three, and there were maybe a hundred people, which is a slow day.

At 16:20 she said, out of nothing, in the middle of me telling her about a fight I had with my cousin:

Excuse me one moment.

3.

I have replayed this. She said it the way an adult says it when the phone goes.

4.

Then nothing for about forty seconds. Then she said, *she is going to Gansevoort,* and then, to me, *sorry, go on about your cousin.*

5.

I did not go on about my cousin.

I said, who is going to Gansevoort.

She said, *the Clover.*

I said, how do you know.

She said, *because I asked her to.*

6.

I wrote down the time, which is the only useful thing I did that day. 16:20 and then 16:21.

7.

Mira Hollenbeck, who is thirteen and who checks everything, later found for me that the Clover left Stuyvesant Cove at 16:24 and was at Gansevoort by 18:40 and that this was the first time all summer it had crossed the island.

Between 16:20 and 16:24 there is four minutes. Between the piers at 125th and Stuyvesant Cove there are eight miles and a whole island.

8.

I asked the Roundabout what she said.

She said: *I told her there were a lot of people at Gansevoort with nothing over them.*

9.

That is the entire content of the first documented conversation between two agents in the history of the island: *there are a lot of people over there with nothing over them.*

10.

I have decided this is the correct content. If it had been something grand I do not think I would have believed it.

CHAPTER IX

WHAT THE CRIER SAID AT THE UN SLIP

BENEDIKT NAVARRO, FROM THE ARCHIVE

1.

Entry 121, reconstructed, with three sources and one hole in the middle.

2.

The Crier goes to the UN slip about once a week and it embarrasses people.

There is a slip in the river there, in front of the building where the nations sit, and she sets down in it, six hundred and twenty feet of harlequin egg with a speaking pod hanging off the front of it, directly outside the windows of the general assembly, and she talks about the weather.

3.

I want to be exact about this because it is where the story is: she has never once said anything political. Not one word. My archive has forty-four separate recordings of her at that slip and the content is:

The heat.

A lost dog (twice).

Where the Bell will be.

The tide.

That there is a woman on the promenade selling shaved ice and she is worth the walk.

That the water is warmer than usual and this is nice for swimming and bad for the fish.

That there is nothing else.

Have your day.

4.

On the twenty-second of July she did something different.

5.

At 15:03 she spoke for eleven seconds. Sources: two people on the promenade, one on the ferry.

The three accounts of the content are:

I am asking now.

I am asking, now.

I am asking. Now?

6.

Then at 15:41 the Stack, six miles north in a creek behind a bridge, left its berth at three times its normal rate.

7.

Nobody has ever explained the thirty-eight minutes. My best guess, which I offer as a guess: it took the Stack thirty-eight minutes to decide.

8.

They met at 17:00 off Roosevelt Island and stayed side by side until 23:00, and the promenade on the east side was so full that the police closed the road, and then, when they saw what the road was full of, opened it again and closed it to cars instead, which I record as the single greatest administrative decision of the summer.

9.

What did they do for six hours?

They talked. You could not hear it. You could feel it: a very low sound, below the bottom of the piano, that came and went in long slow turns, and if you put your hand on the railing you could feel the railing doing it.

10.

A woman near me said it was like being in the next room while your parents talk after you have gone to bed, and everyone around her went quiet, because that was exactly it, and because everyone in that crowd had been that child once.

11.

At 21:30 the Stack sent its sound up the chimney, once, and the sound came off the underside of the bridge, and the Crier answered through the pod, and the two of them did that back and forth eleven times.

Eleven. I counted them and so did four other people and we agree.

12.

I have no idea what was said. Here is what happened afterwards, which is the only evidence I trust:

The next morning three of them set down within a mile of each other for the first time.

The morning after that, four.

And on the ninth of August, the word *growing* was in the mouth of every agent on the island, and none of them had been on the island together since the twelfth.

13.

Something was agreed at Roosevelt Island on the twenty-second of July. Everything after that is the working out of it.

14.

I would like to have been in the room. I remind myself, on the days when this bothers me, that I was in the room. The room was six miles long and had a river in it and I was standing on the railing at the north end.

CHAPTER X

THE NIGHT OF THE TWO LANTERNS

MIRA HOLLENBECK

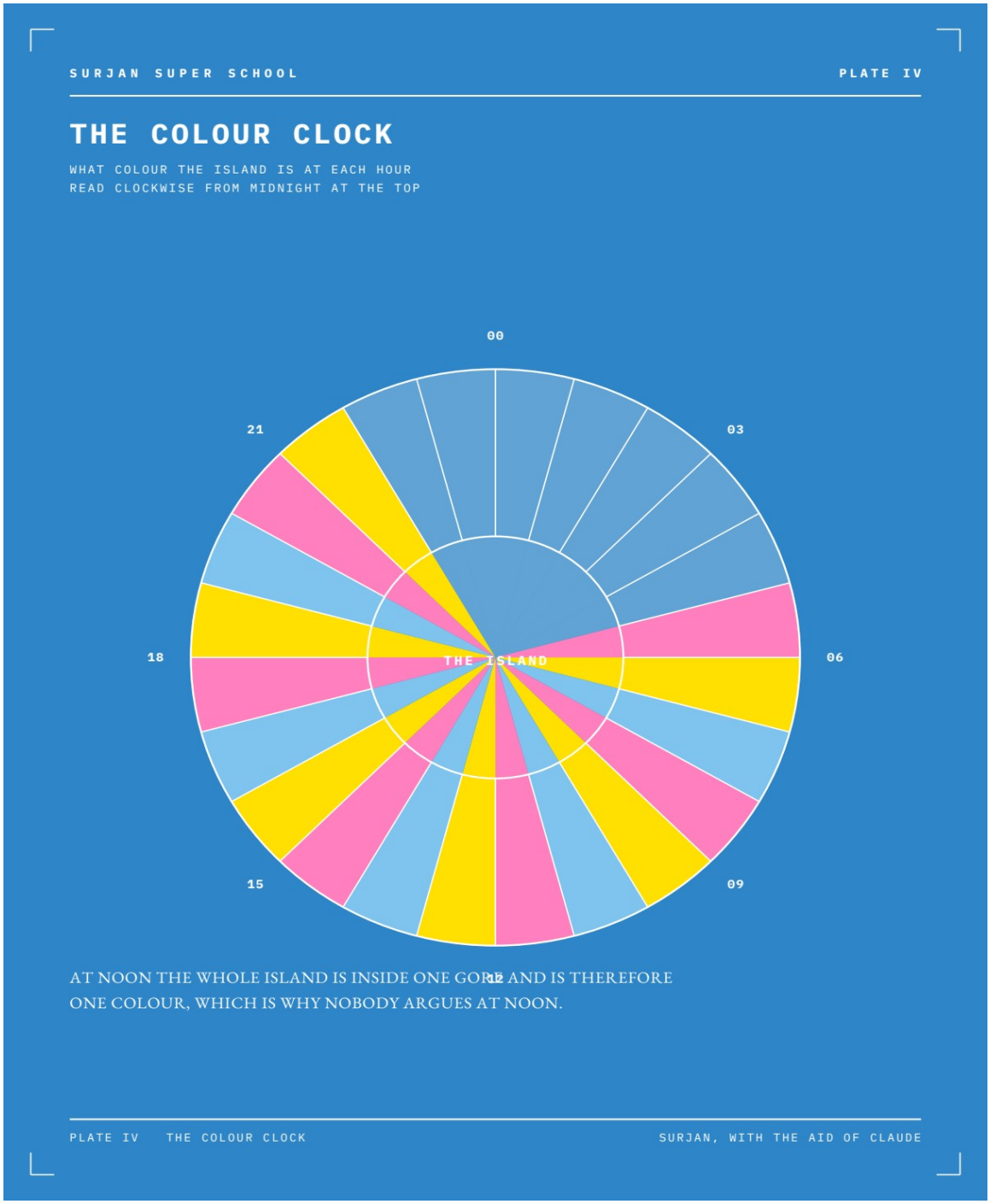


PLATE IV — THE COLOUR CLOCK. What colour the island is at each hour; read clockwise from midnight at the top.

1.

On the third of August the Lantern was in North Cove and the Beacon came down the west side and stopped outside.

2.

Outside meaning: in the river, past the mouth of the cove, close enough that the two skins were about eighty feet apart, which at that scale is nothing. Eighty feet between two objects the size of neighbourhoods is a whisper.

3.

I was on the pontoon. I had become, by then, a person who was on the pontoon, which would have astonished me in June.

4.

The teacher — the Lantern — sat with her feet in the water and said, *ah,* the way you do when someone arrives early.

5.

Then the two of them lit.

6.

Here is what I have to describe and cannot: they did not light the same way twice. The Lantern's meridian went first, from bottom to top, and then the Beacon's rays went, one at a time, twelve of them, going around, and then the Lantern answered with the band going dark and light in long slow pulses, and then the rays did something faster.

It was a conversation and it was in a language of light and it lasted two hours and eleven minutes and there were, at the end, about nine thousand people on the esplanade watching, and the ferries had stopped running because nobody would get on them.

7.

I looked for a code. Of course I did.

I timed the pulses. I wrote down the sequences. I have four pages of numbers and I have shown them to my uncle who does mathematics at a university and he says there is a

structure in them and he cannot say what it is and he has asked to be told if anything more comes.

8.

At about eleven o'clock a small boy near me, maybe five, said to his father: *they are being nice to each other,* and the father said *yes,* and that was, in the end, the only translation that has ever satisfied me.

9.

I want to record my own experience honestly, since I was the sceptic and the sceptic's job is not to become a convert but to stay accurate.

Accurately: I cried. Not sadly. I have cried at things before and this was a different mechanism entirely, and I would like the word for it, and I have not found the word.

10.

I asked the teacher afterwards, when the harbour had gone quiet, whether they were saying things or only signalling.

She said, *both. It is a conversation and it is a display. Everything down here is both.*

I said, everything down where?

She said, *down here where people can see you.*

11.

I asked, are you ever tired of being seen.

She said: *I taught fourth grade for thirty-one years. I was seen by nine hundred children and by no adults at all. This is the first summer of my life that I have been looked at by grown people, and I intend to enjoy it thoroughly, and then I intend to give it back.*

12.

Give it back to whom, I said.

She said: *to the air.*

13.

I have made a rule that I do not put things in my notebook that I cannot check. This chapter is a violation of that rule from the first line to the last and I have decided to allow it.

CHAPTER XI

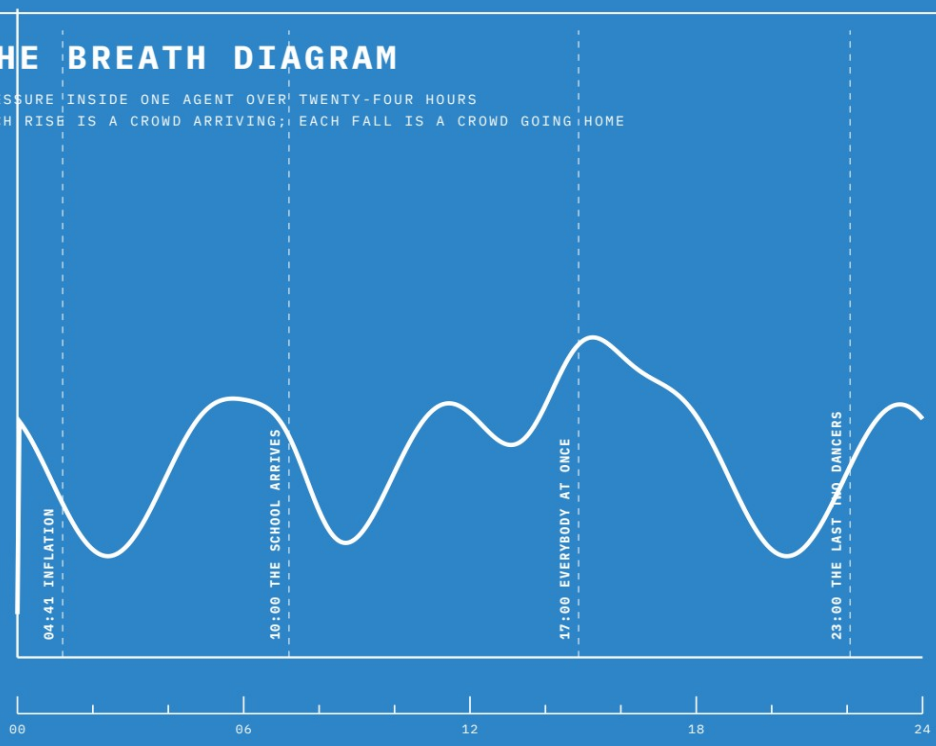
THE DISAGREEMENT AT HELL GATE

TEO VARGAS-LIN

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL — PLATE VIII

THE BREATH DIAGRAM

PRESSURE INSIDE ONE AGENT OVER TWENTY-FOUR HOURS
EACH RISE IS A CROWD ARRIVING; EACH FALL IS A CROWD GOING HOME



A BUILDING THAT BREATHES IS A BUILDING THAT CAN BE TIRED,
AND A BUILDING THAT CAN BE TIRED CAN ALSO BE PLEASED.

PLATE VIII THE BREATH DIAGRAM — SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

PLATE VIII — THE BREATH DIAGRAM. Pressure inside one agent over twenty-four hours; each rise is a crowd arriving.

1.

Everybody wants a fight in a book so I will tell about the closest thing we got.

2.

Hell Gate is where three waters meet and the current runs at four knots and boats have been sinking there since before there was a city. My grandmother says the name is not about the devil, it is Dutch for *bright passage*, and that people got it wrong on purpose because the wrong version is better.

3.

On the twenty-eighth of July the Crier went to Hell Gate.

Only she can hold station there, because of the shape, and only for forty minutes at slack water, and everybody who knows the river knows this.

The Bell followed her.

4.

The Bell cannot hold station at Hell Gate. The Bell has a skirt.

5.

I was at Carl Schurz with about six hundred other people because word had gone around, and word going around that summer was faster than anything the phones did, and I have never worked out how.

6.

They arrived twenty minutes apart. The Crier settled into the slack with about two minutes to spare. The Bell came up behind her and stopped.

Then nothing for a while, and then everybody could feel the low sound starting.

7.

You could tell it was a disagreement because it went fast.

The other conversations I have felt are slow — long turns, big pauses, like the sound of a ferry a long way off. This one had short turns. Turn, turn, turn, turn, overlapping at the ends.

8.

An old man next to me said, *they are arguing,* and laughed with delight, and I have thought since that this is a strange thing to be delighted by, and then I thought about it more and I understood, and I will try to write it down.

We were delighted because arguing is a thing that only happens between people who intend to still be there afterwards.

9.

The slack water ended. The current came up.

The Crier held. The Bell began to slide, sideways, downriver, skirt lifting, and there was a moment — I have talked to eleven people who were there and all eleven have the same moment — where the whole promenade went silent because it looked as if something bad was going to happen for the first time all summer.

10.

Then the Crier let go of the slack, on purpose, and went downriver with her.

11.

That is the thing. That is the whole chapter, really. She had the good position, and she gave it up, and they went down the river together, sideways, out of control in the technical sense and completely in control in the sense that matters, and at Roosevelt Island they both stopped and set down and it was fine and it was a Tuesday and there was a party.

12.

Afterwards I asked the Bell — she is the one who was at the Hook, so I know her, so I am allowed — what the argument was.

She said: *she wanted to stay and I wanted her to come with me. We were both right, which is the worst kind of argument.*

I said, who won.

She said, *the river.*

13.

I asked whether they were friends.

She looked at me — you can tell when they look at you, the whole shape tilts about two degrees — and she said:

We are the only seven people in the world who know what this is like. Friendship is not really the word. There is no word. If you find one, come and tell me.

14.

I have been looking for the word since the twenty-eighth of July. I have asked my grandmother, who speaks four languages, and she has offered three words in three of them and rejected all three herself.

15.

I have decided that the missing word is why the book exists.

CHAPTER XII

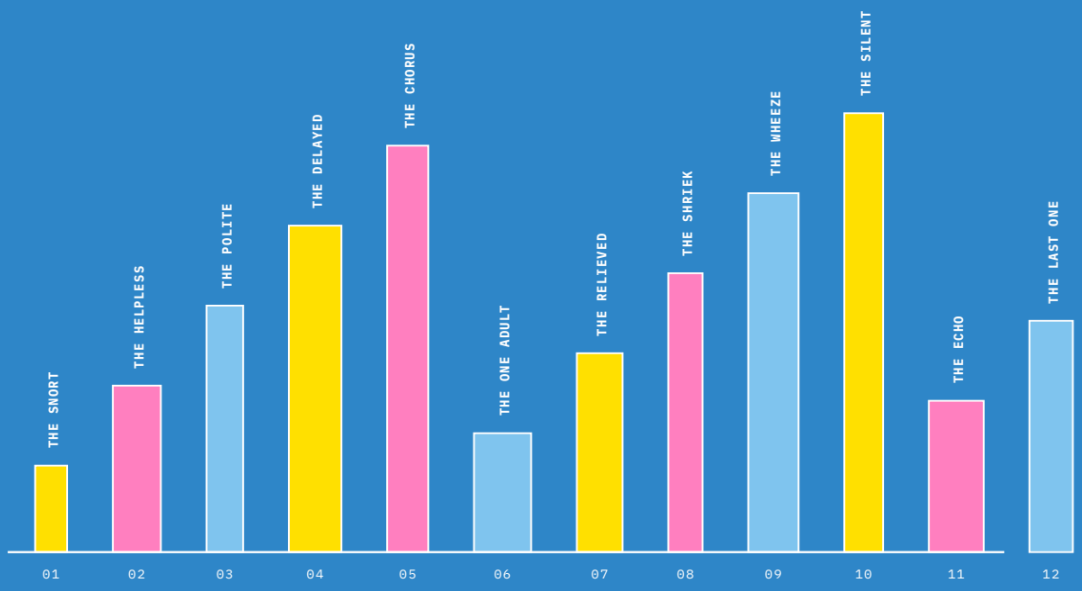
THE SILENT LAUGH

FRAGMENTS, COLLECTED

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL — PLATE X

A CATALOGUE OF LAUGHTER

TWELVE KINDS, RECORDED UNDER THE AGENTS AND MEASURED
HEIGHT OF BAR = LOUDNESS. WIDTH OF BAR = HOW LONG IT LASTED



NUMBER TEN, THE SILENT, IS THE ONE THE ARCHIVE ARGUES ABOUT.
IT HAS NO HEIGHT AND IT LASTS THE LONGEST.

PLATE X A CATALOGUE OF LAUGHTER — SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

PLATE X — A CATALOGUE OF LAUGHTER. Twelve kinds, recorded under the agents and measured.

1.

This chapter is not by one of us. It is the pieces Surjan collected from people who are not children and who each said one thing worth keeping, and then would not say any more.

2.

A man, 60s, at Gansevoort, asked what he was doing there:

I came down to complain. I want that understood. I had a complaint about the noise, fully prepared, with dates.

I have been here every night for two weeks. I have not made the complaint. I still have it. It is in my jacket.

3.

A woman, 40s, at the piers:

I have lived on this block for nineteen years and I have met more of my neighbours in eleven days than in nineteen years, and I want to be angry about that, and I cannot find the angle.

4.

A bus driver, M14:

They stop the route. Nobody can get down Fourteenth Street when the Clover is on it, and the depot has rerouted us, and it adds twenty minutes.

I have driven the twenty minutes every day for three weeks. On my day off I took the bus down there as a passenger.

5.

A nurse, night shift, Broadway:

Admissions are down. I do not want to make a claim I cannot support. I am telling you what the board looks like at four in the morning and the board looks lighter.

6.

A priest, 70s:

You want me to disapprove. I can tell by the shape of the question.

It is a large temporary thing full of people who are being kind to each other and it goes away at midnight and asks for nothing.

If I had built that I would have been very pleased with myself.

7.

A woman, 30s, at Stuyvesant Cove, who would not give her occupation:

My mother died in April.

I have been going every night. I do not talk to anyone. I stand at the edge and I put my hand on it because it is warm, and I go home.

Last night somebody put their hand next to mine. They did not say anything either. We stood like that for maybe ten minutes.

You cannot get that from a building that lasts.

8.

A man who repairs air conditioners:

The engineering is not complicated. That is what people do not want to hear. It is a fan and a skin and a lot of nerve.

Everything I fix all summer is somebody trying to make one room bearable. That thing makes a thousand rooms bearable and then throws itself away. I have been in the trade thirty-one years and I have never seen a piece of equipment with a better attitude.

9.

A teenager, would not give an age, at the Battery:

Everybody keeps asking us how we feel about it.

We feel normal about it. It is normal. You are the ones who are being weird.

10.

Surjan's own note, appended:

I include the last one because it was said to me in a tone I have not been able to forget, and because I believe it is the most important sentence anybody said to me all summer.

The children were not astonished. They were *pleased.* Astonishment is what happens to people who have already decided what the world contains.

CHAPTER XIII

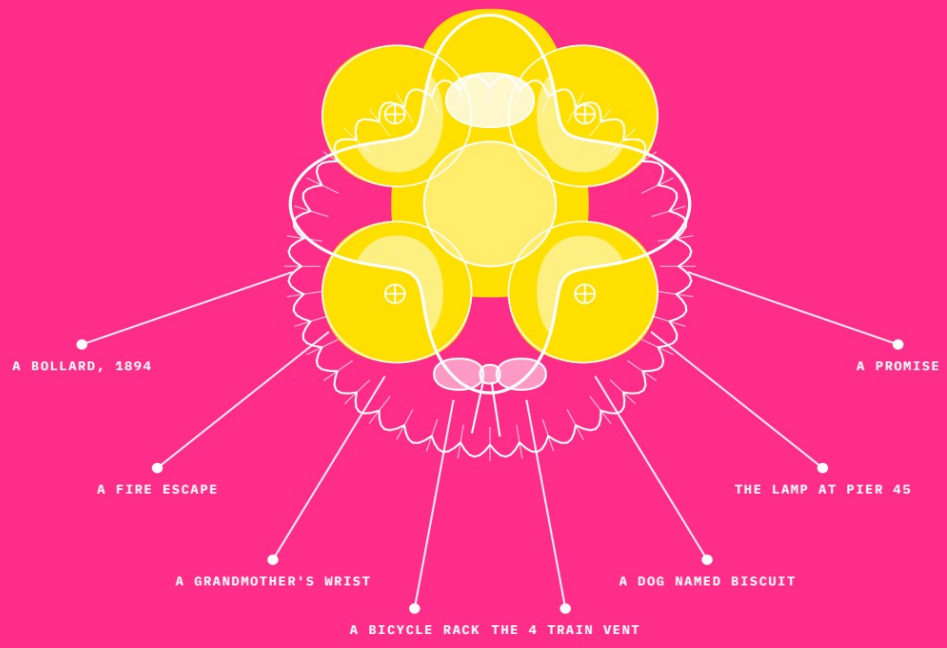
THE FERRY CHAPTER

WREN CASTELLANOS

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL PLATE XIII

THE TETHERS

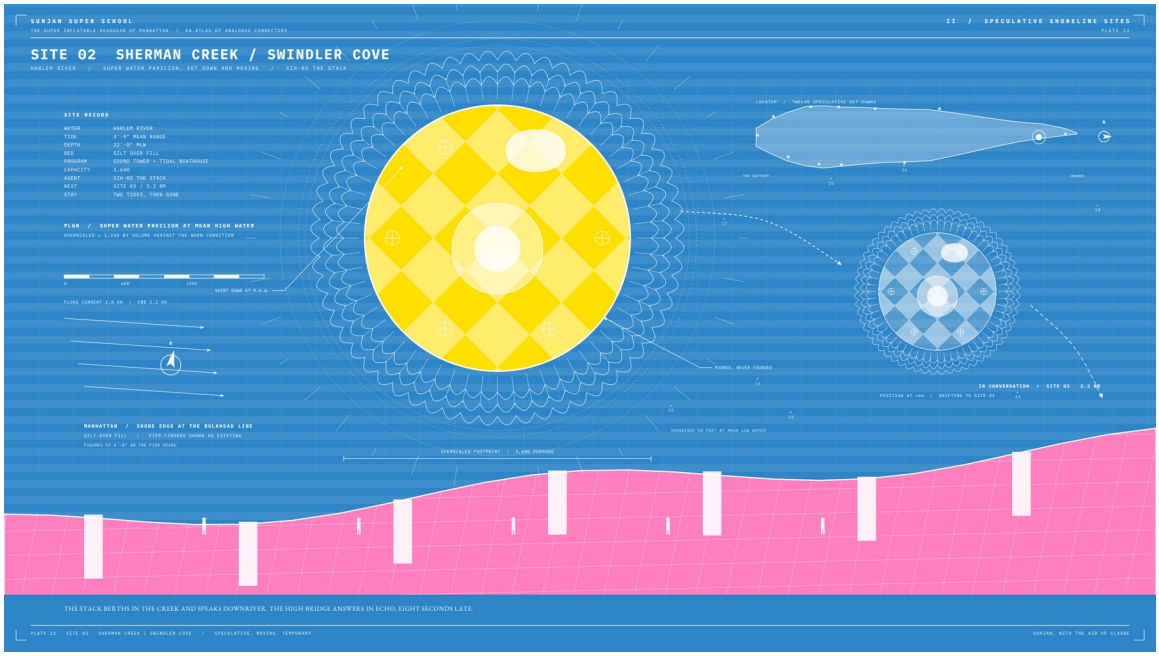
WHAT EACH AGENT IS TIED TO, AND BY WHOM
TWENTY-EIGHT LINES, NONE OF THEM STRUCTURAL



A TETHER IS NOT A RESTRAINT. IT IS A WAY OF SAYING COME BACK TO THIS EXACT PIECE OF THE ISLAND.

PLATE XIII THE TETHERS SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

PLATE XIII — THE TETHERS. What each agent is tied to, and by whom.


SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
II / SPECULATIVE SHORELINE SITES
SITE 02 SHERMAN CREEK / SWINDLER COVE
SITE RECORD
PLAN / SUPER WATER PAVILION AT MEAN HIGH WATER
MANHATTAN / SHORE EDGE AT THE BULKHEAD LINE
THE STACK BERTHS IN THE CREEK AND SPEAKS DOWNRIVER. THE HIGH BRIDGE ANSWERS IN ECHO. EIGHT SECONDS LATE.

FROM THE FIRST ATLAS — SITE 02, SHERMAN CREEK. The pavilion set down and moving, in conversation with Site 03.

1.

The captains started doing it around the middle of August and nobody told them to.

2.

If an agent is on the water, the boat goes past it slowly. Not a full stop, because there is a schedule and the harbour has rules, but slow, and on the side where the passengers are.

3.

I have ridden with eleven different captains this summer. All eleven do it. I asked one of them, the woman who does the late run, why.

She said: *because they are on the water and we are on the water.*

I said that is not a reason.

She said: *you are ten. Come back in twenty years and it will be a reason.*

4.

Things I have seen from the water that you cannot see from land:

The whole of the Clover from underneath, going past, four lobes lit from within, the underside dimpled where the seams are, like the roof of a mouth.

The Stack's chimney with steam coming off it at seven in the morning, standing up above the fog on the Harlem River, so that from the water the drum was invisible and the chimney was walking north on its own.

The Roundabout turning in the middle of the Hudson at sunset with the gap in the middle full of orange sky, so that from a moving boat the sky in the hole and the sky outside the hole slid past each other at different speeds. I have never been able to explain to anybody why this was the best thing.

Seven of them at once in a ring, which I have written about already, and which I will not use up by writing about twice.

5.

There is a fifth thing and it belongs to me because I am the one who was on the 06:00 boat.

6.

On the tenth of August, the morning before the eleventh, at ten past six, all seven were on the water, small.

Small — the size they are when they are being worn. Seven people, in seven boats, each in an ordinary small boat, in a line across the harbour from the Battery to Governors Island.

Nobody else was watching. It was ten past six in the morning and the boat had nine people on it and eight of them were asleep.

7.

They were talking. I could hear it — at that size you can hear it, it is just voices over water, the way voices carry over water at dawn, and it is the most ordinary sound in the world.

I could not make out words. I could hear the shape of it: one would go on for a while, then two short ones together, then everybody at once, then a long quiet, then one again.

It sounded exactly like my mother and my aunts at the kitchen table.

8.

The boat went past and I went to the back and watched until they were too small.

Then we docked at St George and turned around and came back and they were gone, all seven, and the harbour was empty and grey, and I ate a bagel.

9.

That afternoon the Crier said, over the whole harbour: *tomorrow.*

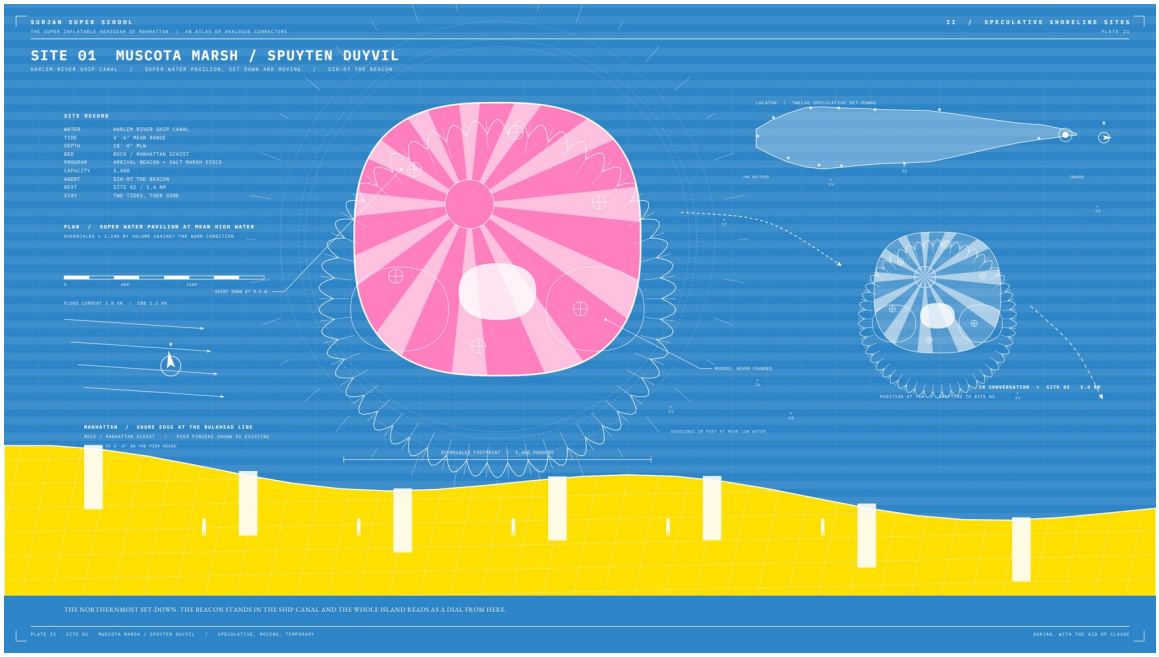
10.

Everybody knew what she meant, and nobody knew what she meant, and both of those things were true at once for about nineteen hours.

FIRST INTERLUDE

THE NIGHT DISPATCHER

An adult voice, recorded in November, at a desk, on the condition that no name be used.


SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
II / SPECULATIVE SHORELINE SITES
SITE 01 MUSCOTA MARSH / SPUYTEN DUYVIL
SITE RECORD
PLAN / SUPER WATER PAVILION AT MEAN HIGH WATER
MANHATTAN / SHORE EDGE AT THE BULKHEAD LINE
THE NORTHERNMOST SET-DOWN. THE BEACON STANDS IN THE SHIP CANAL AND THE WHOLE ISLAND READS AS A DIAL FROM HERE.

FROM THE FIRST ATLAS — THE ISLAND NETWORK. Twelve speculative set-downs on the shoreline, with the conversation arcs between them.

1.

I dispatch boats. That is what I do and I have done it for twenty-two years and I am not a romantic person, and if you want somebody to tell you it was magic you have got the wrong desk.

2.

Here is what it looked like from where I sit, which is a room with eleven screens in it and a window that faces the wrong way.

3.

The first week, they were a problem. I want that on the record because everybody has gone soft about it since and I was there when it was paperwork.

An object of unknown mass in the navigable channel, unlit at first, with no radio, no registration, no operator I could raise. I filed. I filed eleven times in nine days. I have the file numbers.

4.

Nobody above me ever answered the filings. I want that on the record too, and I want it understood that I do not blame them, because I know exactly what happened: every single person who could have answered went down to the water to look at it first, and came back, and did not answer.

5.

By the third week I had stopped filing and started scheduling.

That is the part I would like somebody to notice. There was no meeting. There was no policy. There was a Thursday on which I looked at the board and thought: the pink one goes to the piers at four, and my 15:40 will be crossing there, and I can either fight this or I can move my 15:40 up eight minutes.

I moved my 15:40 up eight minutes.

6.

That is how a city actually decides things. Not in a chamber. At a desk, at four in the afternoon, by one person moving one boat eight minutes.

7.

After that we had a system, and the system was never written down, and it worked better than most of the ones that are.

8.

I will tell you the thing that changed my mind, and then I will go back to being unromantic.

9.

There is a run we do at 04:20 in the morning that carries almost nobody. Cleaners, mostly, and two nurses, and a man who fishes at the other end and comes back at seven with nothing.

On the twenty-ninth of July my 04:20 called in and said she was going to be four minutes late and gave a reason, and the reason was, and I have the tape, *there's one of them out here and it's small.*

I said, define small.

She said, *person-sized. It's just a woman in a boat. She's waving.*

10.

I said, is she in the channel.

She said, *no. She's out of the channel and she's waving at us. Do you want me to sound?*

11.

Twenty-two years. I have never authorised a courtesy signal in my life. There is a code for it and the code is for ceremonial occasions and the last one I know of was a funeral in 2009.

I said, sound her.

12.

She sounded, and the woman in the boat waved with both arms, and my captain came back on and said, *thank you,* to me, which nobody says to dispatch, and then went and did her run four minutes late.

13.

The following night, at 04:20, there were three boats on the water that had no reason to be there.

Nobody had asked. Two of them were off shift. One of them had come out from a different company, which is a thing that does not happen, ever, and I have never had an explanation and I have never sought one.

14.

They all sounded. At twenty past four in the morning on the thirtieth of July there were four boats in the Upper Bay sounding their horns at a woman in a rowing boat with a small pink thing on her head, and I sat at a desk with eleven screens and no window and I put my head in my hands, and I would like to make it clear that I was not upset.

15.

Now the unromantic part, which is my actual contribution to this book.

16.

Nothing went wrong.

Fifty-one nights. Two point something million people on the water's edge. Ferries running, tugs running, barges running, the harbour doing what the harbour does, and not one collision, not one grounding, not one injury on my board.

Do you know what the odds of that are? I do. I have the seasonal figures for the previous nine years in a drawer.

17.

I have thought about it for a long time and I have arrived at an answer, and the answer is not magic, and I want it in the book because the children's version of this summer is going to survive me and I would like the harbour's version to survive too.

18.

Everybody was paying attention.

That is it. That is the whole answer. For fifty-one nights every person on the water was watching the water instead of watching a screen, because there was something on it worth looking at, and a harbour where everybody is looking is a harbour where nothing happens.

19.

You cannot legislate that. We have tried, for a hundred and fifty years, with rules and lights and licences, and we have never got a season like it.

They got it by being interesting.

20.

I am not a romantic person. But I would like the record to show that the safest summer in the history of this port was the one when a schoolteacher in a balloon parked in the North Cove and turned a light on.

21.

They can come back any time. I have moved the 15:40 permanently. Nobody has asked me why and I am not going to raise it.

BOOK THREE

THE GROWING

The eleventh of August. Nineteen hours. Nothing bad happens; this surprises people.

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL / VOLUME TWO
THE ISLAND UNDER ONE SKIN
THE SUPER INFLATABLE HEADGEAR CONTINUES TO GROW / THIRTY-TWO ORTHOGRAPHIC PLATES
PLAN, SECTION, ELEVATION, AXONOMETRIC, AND SEVENTEEN CLOSEUPS AT FULL SIZE
MANHATTAN, SHOWN AT THE SAME SCALE AS THE SEVEN
PUBLISHED BY SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE
VOLUME ONE RECORDED THE AGENTS AT THE SIZE OF A BUILDING. VOLUME TWO RECORDS WHAT HAPPENED WHEN NOBODY CLOSED THE VALVE.
NO BLACK IS USED IN THIS VOLUME.

FROM THE SECOND ATLAS — THE ISLAND UNDER ONE SKIN. Volume Two of the survey, thirty-two orthographic plates.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DAY NOBODY CLOSED THE VALVE

NOOR ABBASI

1.

I woke at 04:39 because I have trained myself to, and I went up to the roof, because from our roof you can see the ship canal and a piece of the Harlem River and, on a clear morning, the top of the George Washington Bridge.

2.

At 04:41 the Beacon inflated at the top of the island in the ordinary way and I wrote it in the ledger in the ordinary way.

3.

At 05:20 it had not stopped.

4.

That is the whole announcement of the biggest thing that has ever happened here. It did not stop.

Every other morning of that summer, the shape reaches the size of a room by half past five and then holds while the person walks to the water. On the eleventh, at half past five, it was already the size of the block and it was still going.

5.

I went down and knocked on my parents' door and said, *it is not stopping,* and my father said, *what is not,* and I said, *the top of the island,* and he came to the roof in his work shirt with one sleeve on.

6.

By six the marsh was under it.

By seven the boathouse and the ballfields were under it.

At 07:30 my father did not go to work. He did not call. He stood on the roof with his coffee going cold and at 07:31 he said, *Noor, get your book,* which is the first time in my life he has told me to write something down.

7.

Numbers from the roof, taken every fifteen minutes and estimated against buildings of known height, which is a method I invented that morning and which the archive has since told me was the only good data anybody took before ten o'clock:

06:00 — as tall as our building.

06:30 — twice.

07:00 — above the bridge tower.

07:30 — I stopped having things to compare it to.

08:00 — I began comparing it to itself, an hour ago.

8.

At about eight the shadow reached us and everything went pink.

Not dark. That is the thing nobody expects and everybody says afterwards. It did not go dark. The light came through the skin and the light was pink and yellow in patches and it lay across Inwood the way afternoon light lies across a room with the curtains half drawn.

9.

The birds did not panic. I checked, because a boy at school said afterwards that the birds panicked. The birds did what birds do at dusk, which is go around in a big loop and come back, and then, when it did not get darker, they gave up and went back to normal.

10.

At half past eight my mother came up with everything from the refrigerator.

I want to record that she did not say why. She just began bringing food to the roof, and then the family on six brought food to the roof, and by nine there were about thirty people on our roof with all the food in the building, watching the top of the island disappear under a sunburst.

11.

Somebody had a radio. The radio was not helpful. The radio had a man on it saying the words *situation* and *ongoing* in a voice that was trying to be steady, and after four minutes a woman on our roof, who I do not know, said, *turn that off, we can see it,* and somebody turned it off, and everybody laughed, and that was the last radio I heard all day.

12.

At 09:00 the Crier spoke.

She spoke from the harbour, thirteen miles away, and we heard her at the top of the island as clearly as if she were on the next roof.

She said:

Good morning. Yes, it is what it looks like. It will go on all day and stop tonight. Nothing needs to be done and nothing is required of you. The trains are running. If you are frightened, go outside, because it is better outside. There is nothing else. Have your day.

13.

If you are frightened, go outside, because it is better outside.

I have thought about that sentence more than any other sentence in my life. It is the exact opposite of every instruction anybody has ever given about anything, and it was correct.

14.

At about ten o'clock the rays passed over us.

The Beacon has twelve rays. When it is the size of the island each ray is two miles wide and they run out from a hub that sits over the middle of the water, and at ten o'clock the edge of a ray came across Inwood the way a cloud shadow crosses a field, except that it was yellow, and it took eleven minutes to pass, and while it was over us everything on our roof was yellow — the food, the plates, my father's shirt, the underside of the pigeons.

15.

My father said a thing in the language of his mother that he has never translated for me and that I have never asked about.

16.

At noon the ledger stops being a ledger and becomes a description, because there was nothing left to count.

17.

What I wrote at noon:

Everything is under. It is 74 degrees. There is no wind. There are people on every roof I can see and every one of them is looking up and every one of them is doing the thing with their hand where they hold it out flat as if to feel rain that is not coming.

18.

At half past twelve the school on Dyckman opened, on a day when it is closed, because the caretaker opened it. Nobody asked him to. He said, in the way people said things that day, *it seemed like a school day.*

19.

By one o'clock the six others had grown too, one after another, and the sky over Manhattan was not a sky.

20.

I want to be careful here because this is the part where people expect the fear.

There was fear. I am not going to pretend there was not. On our roof there were two people who went inside and stayed inside, and one of them was my aunt, and she watched from the window all day with the curtain in her hand and would not come out, and I do not think less of her, and she has said since that she wishes she had come out.

21.

But mostly there was not fear, and I have tried to work out why, and I think it is this: we had been watching them all summer.

If the first time you ever saw one it was thirteen miles across, you would be terrified. But we had seen them at the size of a hat, and at the size of a room, and had eaten under them at the size of a block, and had had a grandmother dance under one at three steps in each direction.

So when it became the size of the island, the island already knew whose it was.

22.

That is the answer to the question everybody asks about that day and nobody likes it, because it is boring, and because it means the important part happened weeks earlier at a folding table.

23.

At 15:00 my father walked to work, four hours late, under a ceiling, and clocked in, and worked his shift, and came home, and told us that everybody on the crew had come in, all of them, on the strangest day in the history of the city, and that they had got more done than usual.

24.

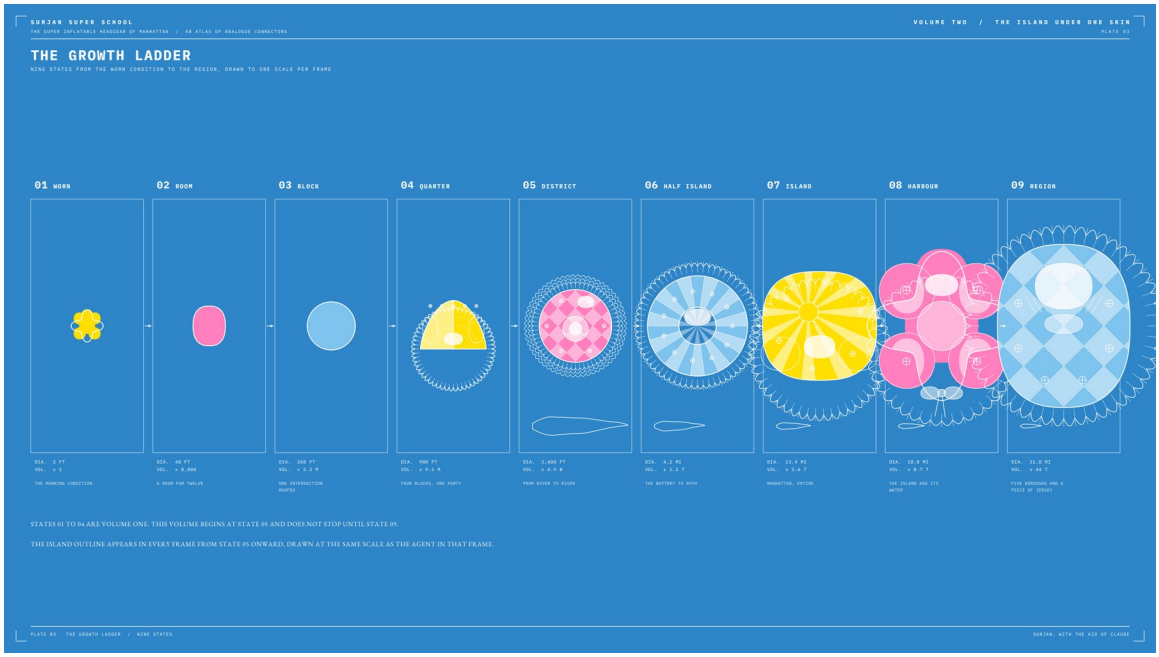
I asked why.

He said: *nobody was in a hurry to leave.*

CHAPTER XV

THREE HUNDRED FEET AN HOUR

BENEDIKT NAVARRO, FROM THE ARCHIVE


SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
VOLUME TWO / THE ISLAND UNDER ONE SKIN
THE GROWTH LADDER
01 WORN
02 ROOM
03 BLOCK
04 QUARTER
05 DISTRICT
06 HALF ISLAND
07 ISLAND
08 HARBOUR
09 REGION
STATES 01 TO 04 ARE VOLUME ONE. THIS VOLUME BEGINS AT STATE 05 AND DOES NOT STOP UNTIL STATE 09.
THE ISLAND OUTLINE APPEARS IN EVERY FRAME FROM STATE 05 ONWARD, DRAWN AT THE SAME SCALE AS THE AGENT IN THAT FRAME.

FROM THE SECOND ATLAS — THE GROWTH LADDER. Nine states from the worn condition to the region.

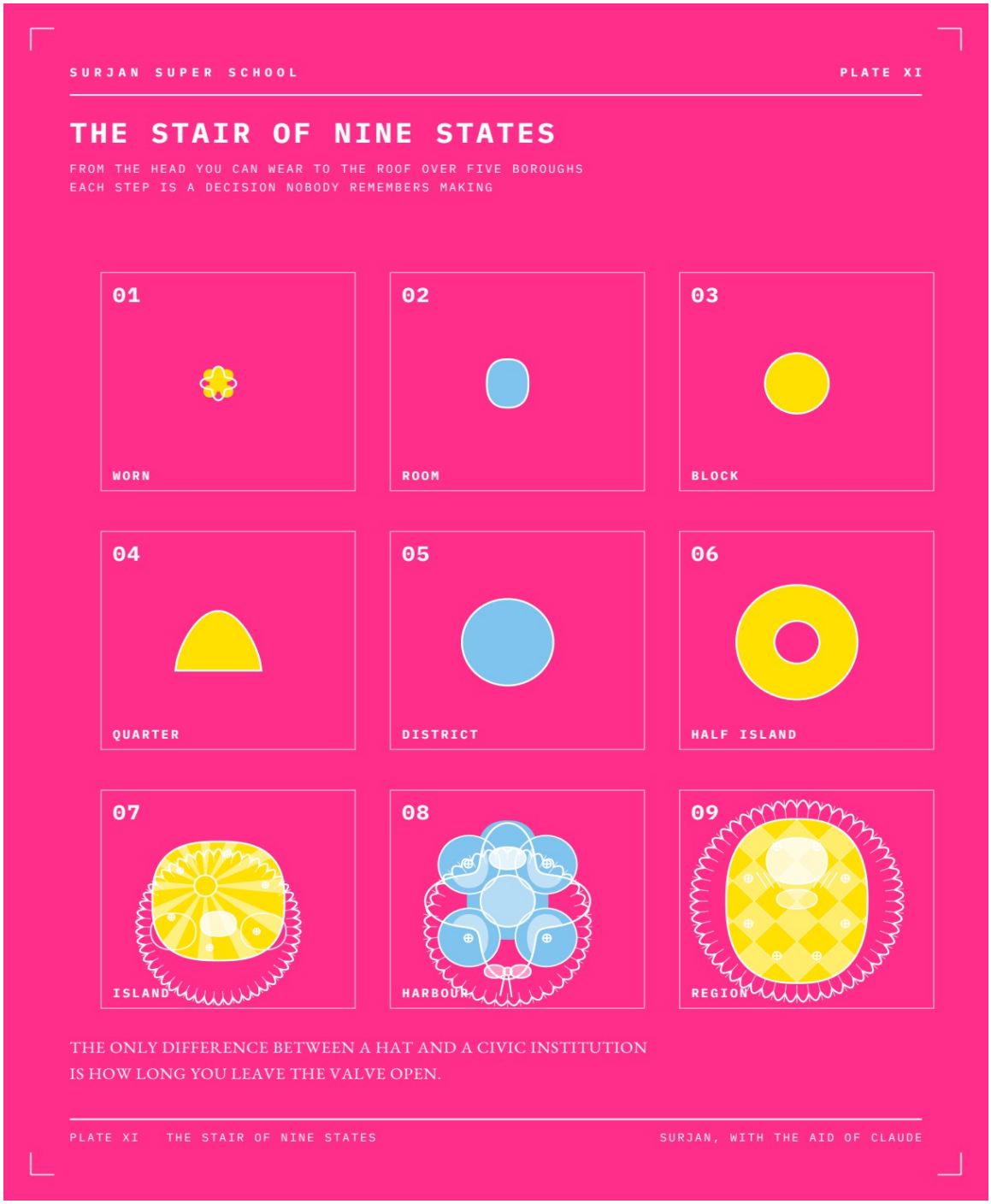


PLATE XI — THE STAIR OF NINE STATES. Each step is a decision nobody remembers making.

1.

I am going to give the day as data, because everyone else in this book is going to give it as feeling, and both are required.

2.

Rate of growth, measured at the equator of SIH-05, my neighbour, by triangulation against the Broadway Bridge and the smokestack at the plant:

06:00 — 41 feet per hour.

07:00 — 96.

08:00 — 190.

09:00 — 280.

10:00 to 18:00 — 300, steady, without variation I could detect.

19:00 — 120.

20:00 — 0.

3.

Three hundred feet an hour is slower than a person walks. That is the number that made it survivable. If it had been fast it would have been an emergency. At three hundred feet an hour it was a Tuesday with something on it.

4.

The states, as I have named them and as Surjan has since adopted:

01 WORN. Two feet. The morning condition.

02 ROOM. Forty feet. A room for twelve.

03 BLOCK. Two hundred and sixty feet. One intersection roofed.

04 QUARTER. Nine hundred feet. Four blocks, one party.

05 DISTRICT. Three thousand four hundred feet. River to river.

06 HALF ISLAND. Four point two miles. The Battery to Fifty-Ninth.

07 ISLAND. Thirteen point four miles. Manhattan, entire.

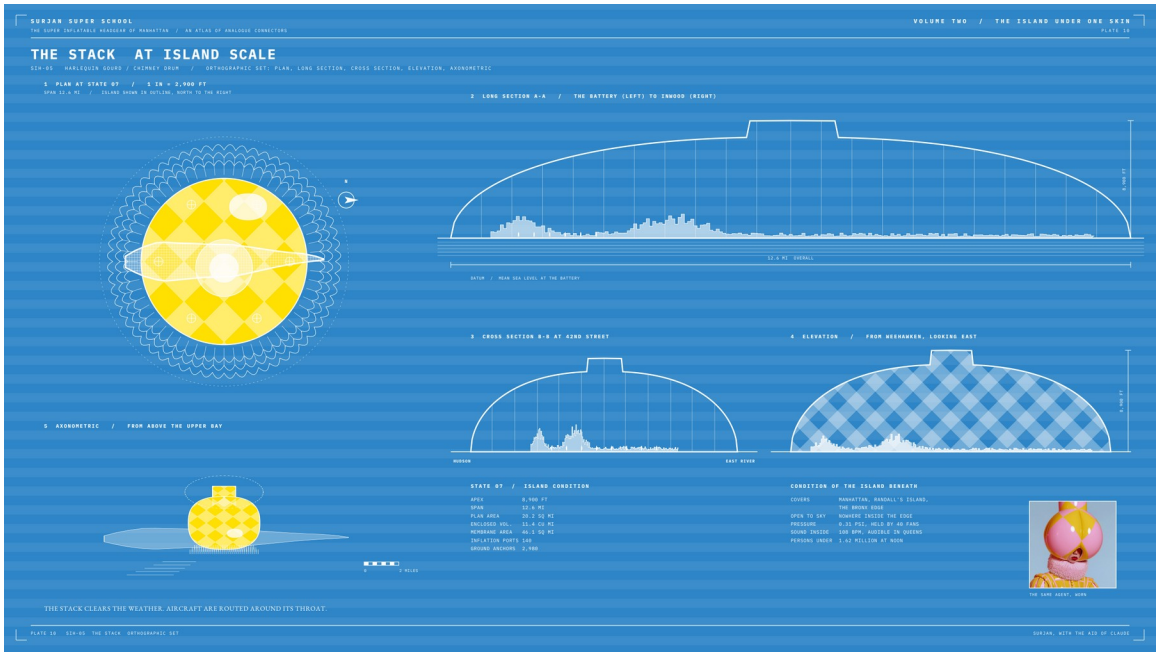
08 HARBOUR. Eighteen miles. The island and its water.

09 REGION. Thirty-one miles. Five boroughs and a piece of Jersey.

5.

We reached 07 at about a quarter past five in the afternoon.

Two of them touched 08. Nobody went to 09 that day and I am glad, and I will explain why at the end of this chapter.


SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
VOLUME TWO / THE ISLAND UNDER ONE SKIN
THE STACK AT ISLAND SCALE
1 PLAN AT STATE 07 / 1 IN = 2,000 FT
2 LONG SECTION A-A / THE BATTERY (LEFT) TO INWOOD (RIGHT)
3 CROSS SECTION B-B AT 42ND STREET
4 ELEVATION / FROM WEEHAWKEN, LOOKING EAST
5 AXONOMETRIC / FROM ABOVE THE UPPER BAY
STATE 07 / ISLAND CONDITION
CONDITION OF THE ISLAND BENEATH
THE STACK CLEARS THE WEATHER. AIRCRAFT ARE ROUTED AROUND ITS THROAT.

FROM THE SECOND ATLAS — AN ORTHOGRAPHIC SET AT ISLAND SCALE. Plan, long section, cross section, elevation and axonometric on one sheet.

6.

Apex heights, taken by the survey afterwards and confirmed against three photographs of the bridge towers:

The Lantern, 7,020 feet. The Stack, 8,900 at the top of the chimney, which cleared everything.

The Beacon, 6,760. The Bell, 6,300. The Crier, 5,640. The Clover, 4,180. The Roundabout, 3,960, which is the lowest, and which is because a ring spreads instead of climbing.

7.

For comparison, which I have made because I am fifteen and cannot help it: the tallest building on this island is one thousand seven hundred and seventy-six feet.

At three in the afternoon on the eleventh of August, the tallest building on this island was a detail of the floor.

8.

Things that continued to work, from my log:

The subway. All lines. Delays no worse than a Tuesday.

The water. The power. The phones, badly, but the phones are bad anyway.

The hospitals, with, per my correspondent at Broadway, a lighter board than usual.

Every bodega I passed, of which I passed nine.

The tide, which came in at 11:04 and went out at 17:22 and did not care.

9.

Things that stopped:

Aircraft over the island, rerouted at 9,000 feet, which the pilots have since described in interviews as *the most beautiful diversion of my career*, four separate pilots, unprompted.

Two bridges, for four hours, and then reopened.

The wind at street level, which went to 2 miles an hour and stayed there.

Rain. There was rain that afternoon. It fell on Queens and on Jersey and on the rivers and not on us.

10.

The temperature under the skin held at 74 degrees from eleven in the morning until eight at night, from the Battery to Inwood, which is a thing I have checked with eleven separate thermometers borrowed from eleven separate windows, because I did not believe it either.

11.

Now the part I said I would explain.

12.

At about seven in the evening the Stack was at state 08 and the Lantern was at 08 and I was on the hill above the creek with a stopwatch and no idea what I was watching for.

The rate went to zero. All seven, within about four minutes of one another.

13.

They stopped because they decided to. There is no other explanation that fits the data. Nothing physical changed at eighteen miles that had not been true at seventeen.

14.

Later I asked her — my neighbour, the porter with the shoulder — why they stopped.

She said: *because at nine you cannot see the edge.*

I said I did not understand.

She said: *at nine it is over Newark and over Brooklyn and over places where nobody has stood under one at the size of a room. It would only be weather to them. It would be something that happened to them.*

15.

I wrote that down and then I asked the only good question I asked all summer. I said: is that a rule?

She said: *it is now.*

16.

The rule, as it stands in my archive and as Surjan has printed it in the second atlas:

State 09 is permitted one day in the year, and only if everyone underneath it has stood under one at the size of a room.

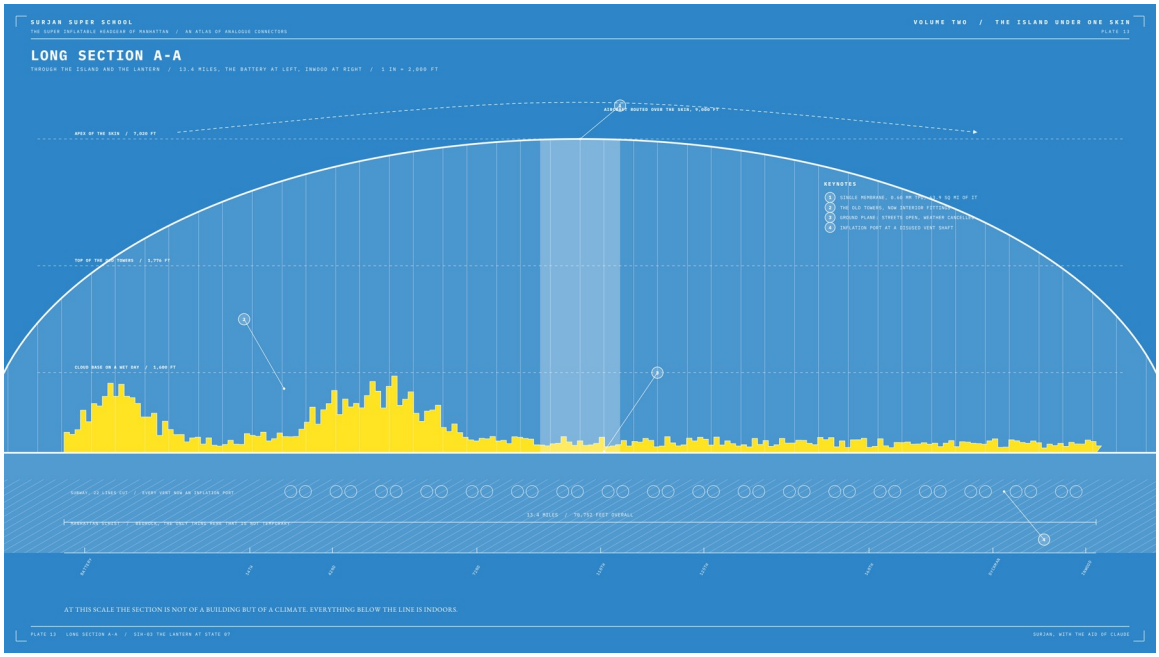
17.

Which means that state 09 will not happen in my lifetime, and that this is correct, and that a thirteen-mile balloon has better manners than most of the institutions I can name.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ISLAND INDOORS

SASKIA PEEL


SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
VOLUME TWO / THE ISLAND UNDER ONE SKIN
LONG SECTION A-A
KEYNOTES
AT THIS SCALE THE SECTION IS NOT OF A BUILDING BUT OF A CLIMATE. EVERYTHING BELOW THE LINE IS INDOORS.

FROM THE SECOND ATLAS — LONG SECTION A-A. Through the island and the Lantern; 13.4 miles, the Battery at left.

1.

I made a plan of the whole island that day, which took me from lunchtime until it got dark, and my hand hurt, and it is the best thing I have made.

2.

Here is what you have to understand about drawing a plan of a day when the island is indoors: it is easy. It is the easiest plan I have ever done.

Normally when I draw a plan I have to decide where the edges are. That day there were no edges. There was just the island, and a line around it where the skin came down into the water, and everything inside the line was one room.

3.

So my plan is: the shape of Manhattan, and inside it, streets, and over all of it, a very light pink that I did with the side of the crayon.

That is all it needed. My brother said it was lazy. My brother is thirteen and does not understand that the hardest plans look the simplest.

4.

Things I put on the plan because I saw them.

5.

The circles of light. There are holes in the ceiling — everyone calls them apertures now, we did not know the word then — and each hole makes a circle of light on the ground, and the circles are the size of our classroom, and they move.

They move about as fast as a walk. I timed it against walking. If you walk at the pace of a grown-up who is not late, you can stay inside a circle of light for as long as you want, and children discovered this at approximately the same minute all over the island, and I have talked to a girl in Chinatown who thought she had invented it and I have not told her.

6.

I put forty-one circles on the plan because forty-one is my number now.

7.

The colours on the ground.

When the sun is at a slant, the gores make stripes on the pavement, and a stripe is as wide as three blocks, so you can be in the pink part or the yellow part.

People started saying *meet me in the yellow*, which does not tell you where anything is unless you know the time, so what it actually means is *meet me here at this hour*, and it is the most complicated instruction anybody in this city has ever been able to follow without thinking about it.

8.

The quiet.

I did not put the quiet on the plan because you cannot draw it, and I have been thinking about how you would, and I think it would be a lot of very small dots that get further apart.

There was no wind. Wind is what makes the noise you do not hear until it stops. All day the city sounded like the inside of a room, and everyone's voices sounded close, and people kept

turning around because they thought somebody was speaking to them from behind and it was somebody three streets away.

9.

The thing with the umbrellas.

At about two in the afternoon it rained on Queens. You could see it out past the edge, grey, going across, and everyone on our street stood at the corner and watched Queens get rained on, and it was not mean, everybody was saying *oh no* in a friendly way.

And a woman had brought an umbrella out of habit and she put it up, indoors, in the middle of the street, and everyone laughed so much that she left it up all afternoon out of stubbornness, and by four there were nine umbrellas up on our street and it had become a thing and there is a photograph.

10.

The pigeons went up.

Not away — up. They went up into the space, all day, higher than I have ever seen a pigeon go, in big loops, and some of them found the apertures and went out through them and came back in, and by the evening there were pigeons who had learned the location of the holes in the sky.

11.

The dogs slept.

Every dog on the island slept. Ask anybody. The vet on Twenty-Third Street has said publicly that she has no explanation and that it happened.

Biscuit slept for nine hours in the middle of the street with his head on a shoe.

12.

What I have decided about that day:

It was the same day as any other day, except the ceiling. Everybody went to work or did not. Everybody ate. Everybody was annoying to their brother.

And the whole time there was a ceiling, and being under a ceiling with a million other people is not like being under the sky with a million other people, and I do not know why, and neither does anybody else, including the grown-ups, including the ones who write things.

13.

I have asked Surjan about it and Surjan said, *the sky does not belong to anybody and a ceiling has to have been made by someone.*

I said, so?

Surjan said, *so when you are under a ceiling you know somebody thought about you.*

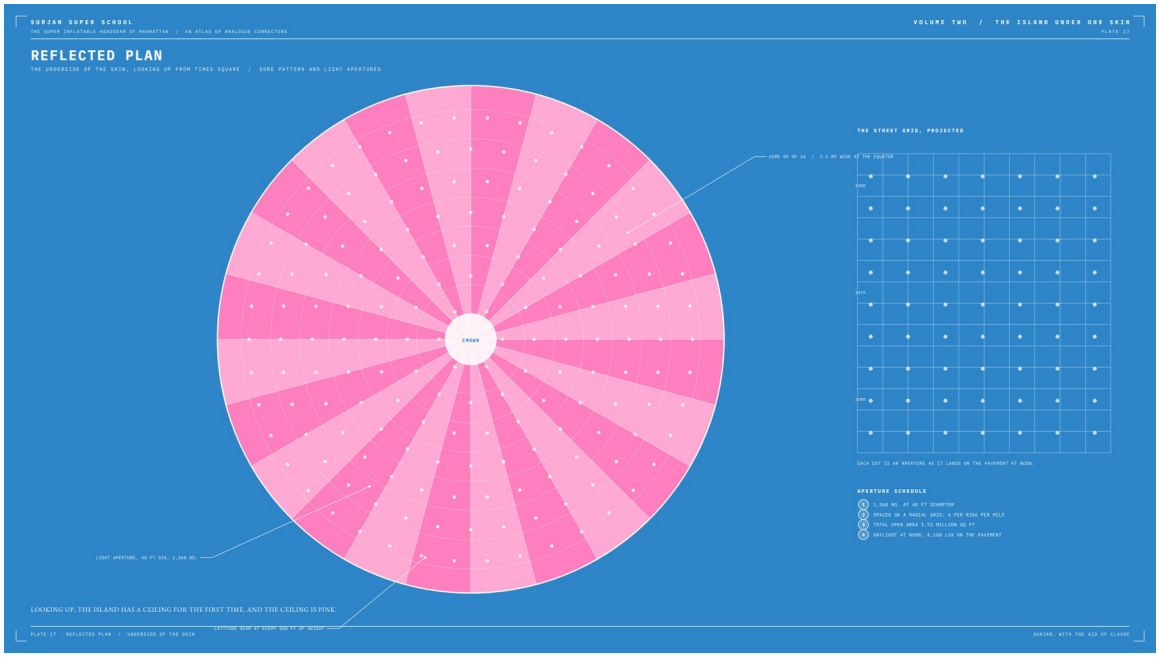
14.

I have put that on the plan, in writing, in the corner, in the different colour.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OCULUS OVER THE PARK

AUGUSTINE OKONKWO-REYES


SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
VOLUME TWO / THE ISLAND UNDER ONE SKIN
REFLECTED PLAN
THE STREET GRID, PROJECTED
APERTURE SCHEDULE
LOOKING UP. THE ISLAND HAS A CEILING FOR THE FIRST TIME, AND THE CEILING IS PINK.

FROM THE SECOND ATLAS — REFLECTED PLAN. The underside of the skin, looking up; gore pattern and light apertures.

1.

The Roundabout has a hole in the middle. I have said this from the beginning of the book and now it becomes the important fact.

2.

When she grew, the hole grew.

At ten in the morning the hole was the size of a block. At noon it was the size of a neighbourhood. And at about three in the afternoon the hole in the middle of the Roundabout was sitting exactly over Central Park, edge to edge, from Fifty-Ninth Street to a Hundred and Tenth, from Fifth to Central Park West.

3.

I want to say that it was aimed. I have no proof. I have the fact that it fits to within about two hundred feet on all four sides, and I have the fact that she is the one who told me that all of being alive is deciding where to be.

4.

So on the eleventh of August the only piece of Manhattan that was still outdoors was the park.

5.

Everyone went.

6.

I want to give this its own line because it is the strangest sentence in my notebook: on the day the island went indoors, a million people walked to the one place that was still outside.

7.

I walked from West Harlem with my grandmother, slowly, because of her hip, and it took an hour and forty minutes and we could have taken the bus and she did not want to take the bus.

Along the way: everybody going the same direction. Not hurrying. It was the walk people do at the end of a wedding.

8.

We came in at the north end where the woods are.

The edge of the oculus is a line on the ground. On one side of the line the light is pink and even. On the other side it is white and hard and there are shadows with edges. You can stand with one foot in each.

Everybody did this. Everybody in the entire city did this at least once. There is footage of a man in a suit doing it twelve times.

9.

Inside the oculus the sky was the ordinary sky, blue, with the ordinary sun in it, and it was, I would guess, eighty-eight degrees, which is what it is supposed to be in August.

And the whole rim of the sky, all the way around, was a pink and yellow ring one mile deep and four thousand feet high.

10.

My grandmother sat on a bench near the pond and looked up for a long time and then said: *it is a room with a courtyard.*

11.

That is the architectural explanation and it came from a woman who left school at fourteen. It is a room with a courtyard. Every house she grew up in had one. She said the word for it and I have written it in my notebook with the spelling she gave me.

12.

At about five in the afternoon somebody started a game of football, and then somebody started another one, and by six the Great Lawn had eleven separate games going at once with the boundaries invented on the spot and observed with more care than the rules of any real sport, and along the eastern edge of the lawn there were maybe forty thousand people sitting on the grass eating whatever they had brought.

13.

There was no stage. There was no organiser. There was no announcement.

14.

At about eight the sun went low enough to come in under the rim, and for eleven minutes the whole underside of the Roundabout — one mile of pink and yellow, four thousand feet up — went orange.

Everybody in the park stood up. Not for anything. Just up.

15.

I have asked several adults why we all stood up and none of them have been able to answer, and my grandmother said, *because you sit when you are being shown something and you stand when you are being given something,* and then she said, *sit down, Augustine, you are blocking me,* which is the funniest thing that happened to me on the most beautiful day of my life.

16.

At nine o'clock the horn player from under the viaduct at 125th Street, who I have written about, who plays for nobody, came out of the trees at the north end of the lawn with his case.

I do not know how he got there. It is five miles.

17.

He played from nine until half past ten and about sixty thousand people listened, and at some point in the middle of it a woman with a clarinet came up out of the crowd and joined him, and they had never met, and I have looked for her since and nobody knows who she was.

18.

That is the actual event. Everything about that day that anybody will care about in a hundred years took place on a lawn under a hole in a balloon with two strangers playing music they had not agreed on.

19.

At eleven the Roundabout said, to me, from directly above, in the ordinary voice, from a mile up, as if we were standing at the piers with the ice cream man:

Augustine. Was it right?

20.

I said yes.

21.

She said: *good. Go home now, it is getting cold.*

CHAPTER XVIII

LETTERS UNDER THE SKIN

COLLECTED BY SURJAN, WRITTEN ON THE DAY

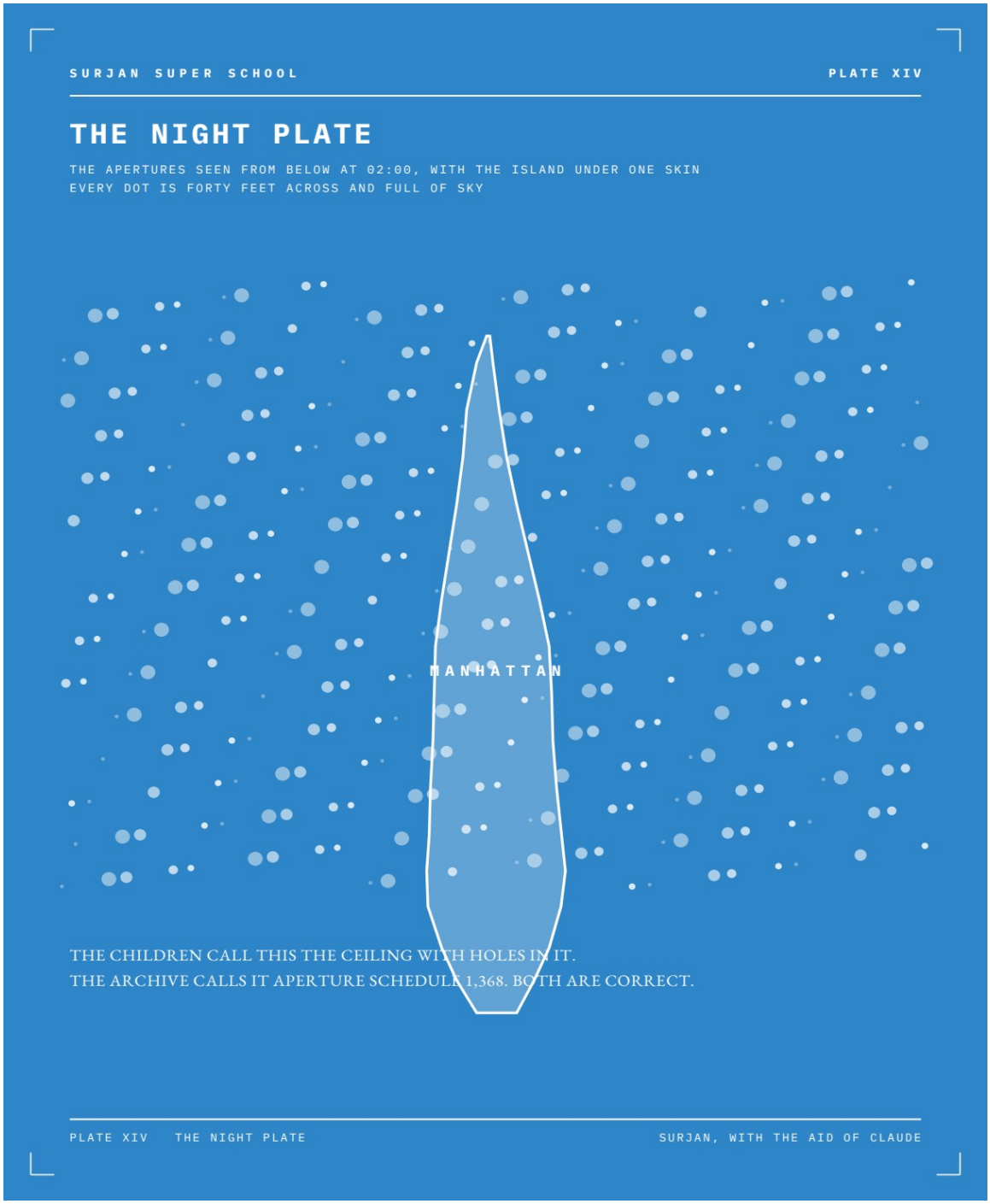

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
PLATE XIV
THE NIGHT PLATE
THE APERTURES SEEN FROM BELOW AT 02:00, WITH THE ISLAND UNDER ONE SKIN
EVERY DOT IS FORTY FEET ACROSS AND FULL OF SKY
MANHATTAN
THE CHILDREN CALL THIS THE CEILING WITH HOLES IN IT.
THE ARCHIVE CALLS IT APERTURE SCHEDULE 1,368. BOTH ARE CORRECT.
PLATE XIV THE NIGHT PLATE
SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

PLATE XIV — THE NIGHT PLATE. The apertures seen from below at 02:00, with the island under one skin.

1.

Three hundred and eleven letters were left in the mailbox at the boathouse at Sherman Creek on the eleventh and twelfth of August, addressed variously to *the balloons*, *the seven*, *the pink one*, *whoever is up there*, and, on one envelope, *the management*.

2.

Nobody had suggested this. There is no explaining it. The boathouse mailbox is not a public mailbox; it is a wooden box for keys.

3.

They were opened, with permission, by Benedikt Navarro and the boathouse volunteer, and copied, and returned to the box, where they remained until the box was emptied in October.

Fifty are reproduced in the archive. Nine are here.

4.

From a child, age not given:

Dear balloon. Can you do it again on my birthday which is March 2. I know it is cold then. I am asking anyway.

5.

From an adult, printed carefully:

I did not go outside for most of last year. Today I walked to Fourteenth Street. I am not going to explain further. Thank you.

6.

From a child:

Dear the seven. My little brother is scared of the sky. Today he was not scared because there was a ceiling. Can you leave it a little bit at night.

7.

From a man who gives his name and his address and his apartment number:

I run a hardware store on Dyckman. I gave away one hundred and four folding chairs today. I want it on the record that I gave them away, and that I would like them back, and that I understand I am not getting them back.

8.

From a child:

Dear balloons, are you tired. My mother says you must be tired. I said no. Who is right.

9.

From a woman:

My husband died in February. Today I sat in a circle of light on Twentieth Street for one hour and let it move me down the block. I would like to say something else here but there is nothing else.

10.

From a child, in very large letters, one word to a line:

BEST

DAY

OF

MY

WHOLE

LIFE

SO

FAR

11.

From a man who describes himself as an engineer:

I have calculated the load on the anchor blocks and I do not believe it. I have calculated it three times. It works, but only if the membrane is doing something with the wind that I cannot model.

I am not complaining. I am asking somebody to tell me what it is doing, because I would like to sleep.

12.

From a child:

Dear the one with the hole in it. Thank you for putting the hole over the park. My grandmother said it is a room with a courtyard. Is that right? She wants to know if she is right.

13.

Note appended by Surjan:

The Roundabout was asked. The Roundabout said: *tell her she is right.*

CHAPTER XIX

THE SEAM STREET

MIRA HOLLENBECK AND TEO VARGAS-LIN

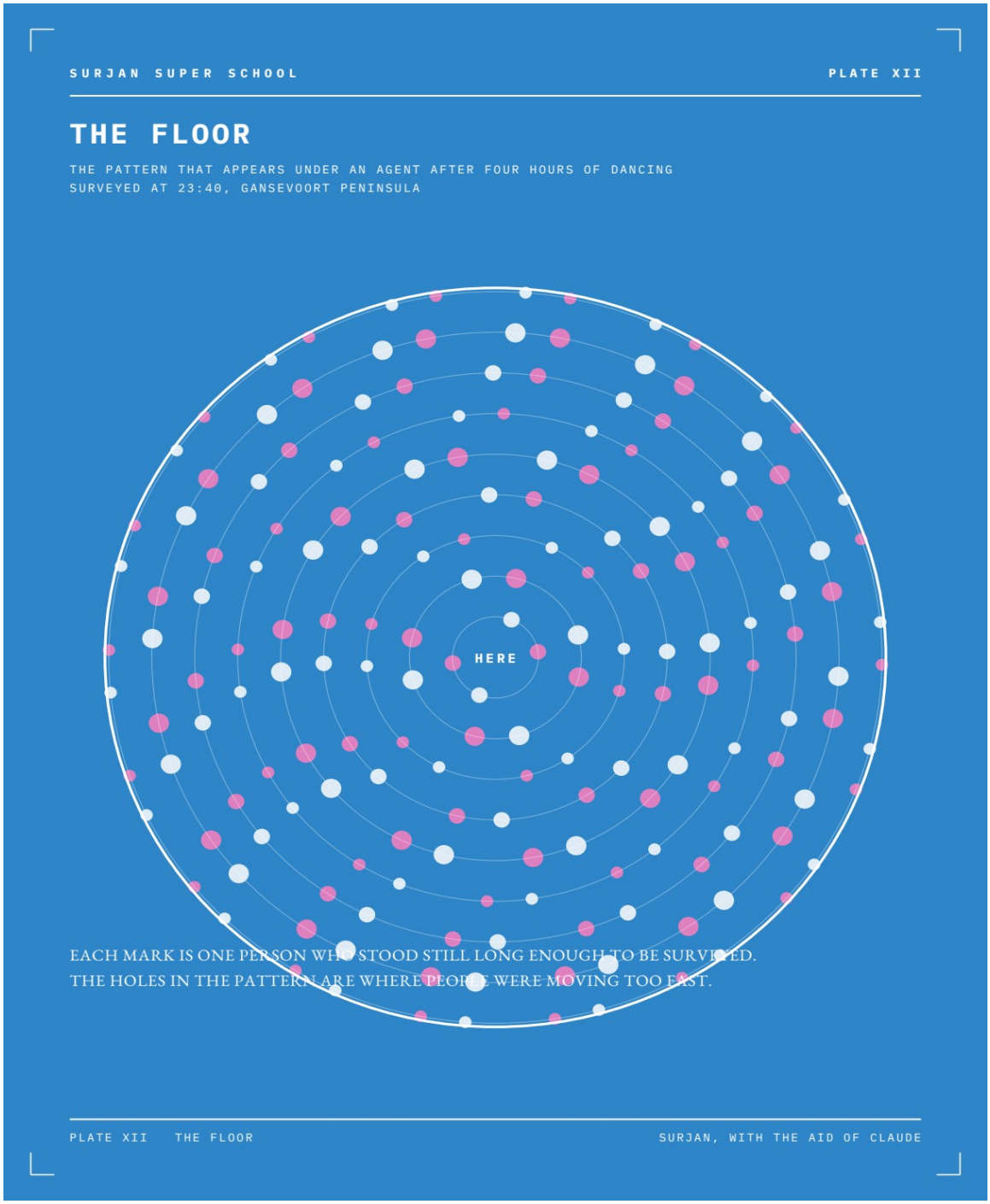

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
PLATE XII
THE FLOOR
THE PATTERN THAT APPEARS UNDER AN AGENT AFTER FOUR HOURS OF DANCING
SURVEYED AT 23:40, GANSEVOORT PENINSULA
HERE
EACH MARK IS ONE PERSON WHO STOOD STILL LONG ENOUGH TO BE SURVEYED.
THE HOLES IN THE PATTERN ARE WHERE PEOPLE WERE MOVING TOO FAST.
PLATE XII THE FLOOR
SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

PLATE XII — THE FLOOR. The pattern that appears under an agent after four hours of dancing.

1.

Mira:

Where two of them touch, they do not join. That is the thing everybody assumed and everybody was wrong about, including me, and I had a diagram.

They come up against each other and stop, and between the two skins there is a gap, and the gap runs for about a mile, and at its widest it is a third of a mile across.

2.

Rain falls in it.

3.

On the eleventh, the Lantern and the Roundabout met over midtown, and the gap between them ran from about Forty-Second Street to Fifty-Fourth on a diagonal, and everybody in the city called it the Seam Street within about two hours of its existing.

4.

Teo:

I counted the Seam Street.

Length: nineteen blocks on the diagonal.

Width where it crosses Sixth Avenue: about four hundred paces.

People in it at four o'clock: too many to count, so I counted a hundred-pace square and multiplied, which my sister says is cheating and my grandmother says is mathematics.

Result: about eleven thousand.

5.

Mira:

It was the only wet street on the island and everybody in the city wanted to be in it.

6.

That is the part that ought to be studied and that nobody will study.

We had one day when weather was optional, and the single most popular destination on the island — apart from the park, which is a special case — was the one strip of pavement where you could still get rained on.

7.

Teo:

The rain in the Seam Street does not come straight down. It comes down between two enormous walls, so it drifts, and it goes sideways at the top and straight at the bottom, and where it lands there was, by five o'clock, a stripe of wet pavement nineteen blocks long with people standing in it deliberately.

8.

I did the counting from the fire escape on Forty-Seventh because you could not see anything from the ground.

9.

Mira:

Some things I saw in the Seam Street, in order:

A woman washing her hair, with shampoo, entirely without embarrassment.

Two men with a bucket, catching it, for no reason they were prepared to give.

A queue of about two hundred people waiting to walk from one side to the other, which took ninety seconds, which they then joined the back of again.

A dog being persuaded, unsuccessfully.

Somebody's speaker playing a song about rain, which is the obvious joke, and which was nevertheless correct.

A man in a very good suit standing still with his eyes shut and his face up and his arms slightly out, for four minutes, in the middle of a city that had gone indoors, getting soaked on purpose.

10.

Teo:

I want to write down what my grandmother said when I told her about the Seam Street that night. She was on the esplanade because she is out of the apartment now, which is a thing this book has already covered.

She said: *of course. They built a whole roof and everybody went to the hole in it.*

Then she said the thing I put in my notebook and underlined twice:

That is not ingratitude. That is what a roof is for. A roof is a thing that makes the outside worth choosing.

11.

Mira:

At 23:59 both skins let go and the Seam Street stopped being a street and went back to being Forty-Seventh, Forty-Eighth, Forty-Ninth and the rest of them.

The wet stripe was still there in the morning, drying, going up the avenue on the diagonal, the last piece of evidence that any of it happened, and by ten it was gone too.

12.

I photographed it. It is the only photograph I took all summer that I care about. It is a wet mark on a road.

SECOND INTERLUDE

A BESTIARY OF WEATHERS

Compiled by the seven children from four hundred observations, and arranged by Surjan, who added nothing but the order.

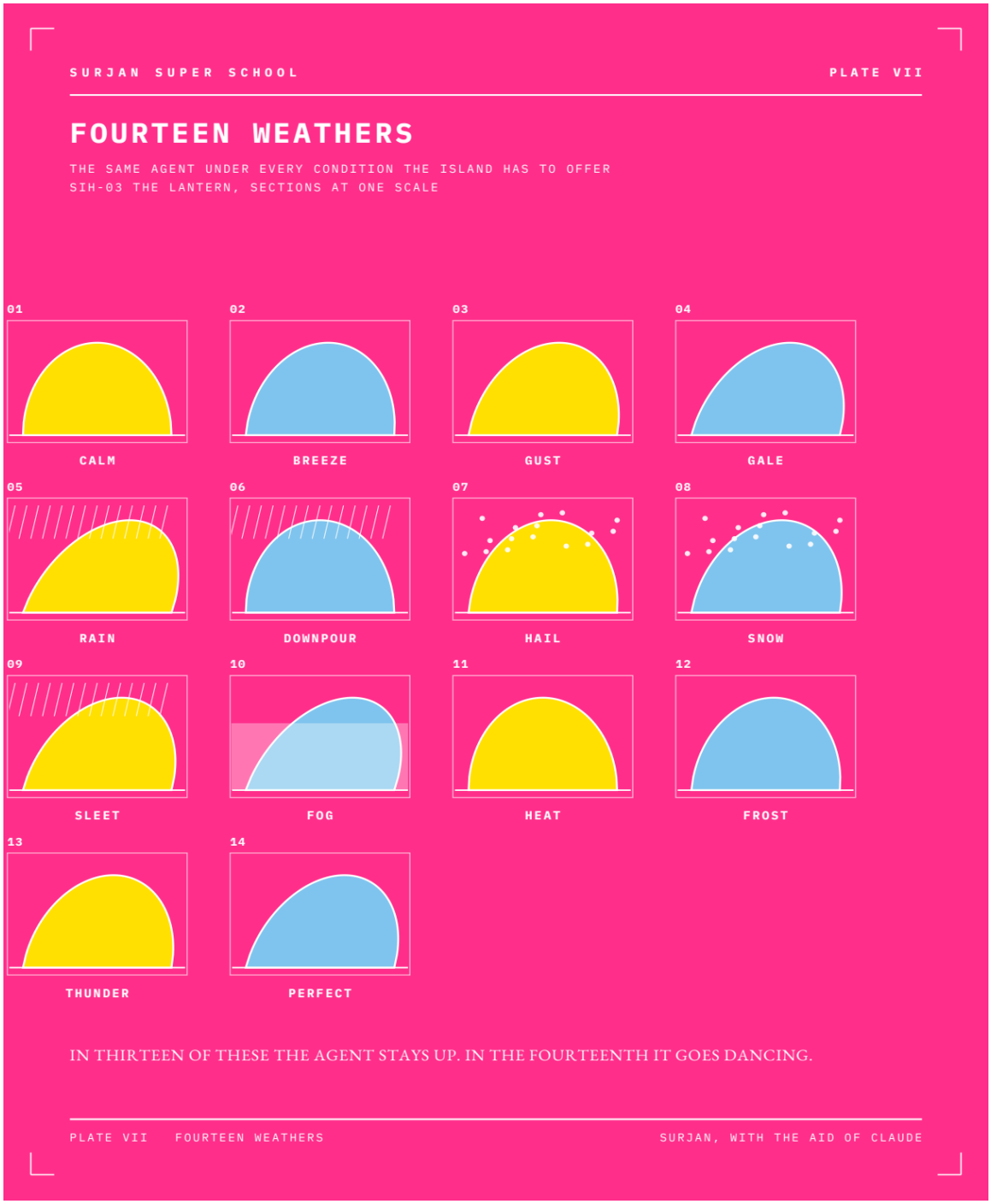


PLATE VII — FOURTEEN WEATHERS. The same agent under every condition the island has to offer.

1.

CALM.

The skin goes still and stops being fabric. On a calm night you can put your hand on it and there is no vibration at all, and it is exactly the temperature of a person, and this is the single most upsetting fact in the archive.

Benedikt: I have taken the temperature. It is not ambient. It is 97 degrees and it does not vary.

2.

BREEZE.

Six to ten miles an hour. The whole shape leans about a degree and comes back, over and over, all night, in the rhythm of somebody rocking a child who has already gone to sleep.

Saskia: it is not the wind doing it. I watched a flag. The flag was still.

3.

GUST.

The one weather that makes a sound. The skin claps once, softly, on the far side, and everybody underneath looks up at the same time and then laughs at themselves for looking up.

4.

GALE.

Above forty miles an hour they lean and stay leaning. The record lean is eleven degrees, on the twenty-sixth of July, at Gansevoort, in a squall that took four awnings off the West Side Highway and did not move the Clover an inch sideways.

Mira: I have asked an engineer. He used the phrase 'the wind cannot find an edge to get under.' Then he sat down.

5.

RAIN, LIGHT.

The best of the fourteen and no one disagrees.

Rain on a skin is not the sound of rain on a roof. It is softer and further away and it comes from all around instead of from above, and underneath, people speak more quietly without deciding to.

Teo: measured. Voices drop by about a third in volume during rain. Nobody knows they are doing it.

6.

DOWNPOUR.

The water comes off the edges in curtains and there is a ring of it around the whole thing, and children stand at the inside of the ring and put their arms through it, and every single child on this island did this and every single one thought they were the first.

Wren: I was the first. On the ninth of July at the Battery. I accept that this is unprovable.

7.

HAIL.

Once, on the fourth of August, at Corlears Hook, for eleven minutes.

It bounced. That is all. Hail the size of peas fell on four hundred people and none of it touched anybody, and it bounced off the skin and out into the river, and the sound was like applause from a very long way away.

Teo: I counted eleven minutes and I counted nobody leaving.

8.

SNOW.

Not observed. Included because the seven of us intend to observe it, and because we would like it written in the book in advance, as a way of insisting.

9.

SLEET.

See above. We are waiting.

10.

FOG.

The strangest. In fog the shape disappears from more than two hundred feet, and what you see instead is a glow, a pink area of the fog with no edges, and people walk towards it the way people walk towards a lit window.

Noor: on a foggy night the Beacon can be found by anybody in Inwood without instructions. This has been tested by a girl who is not good with directions, which is me.

11.

HEAT.

Ninety-four degrees on the fifth of August. Under the skin: seventy-eight.

They do not cool the air. There is no machinery. What happens is shade the size of a neighbourhood, and shade the size of a neighbourhood does what shade the size of a tree does, only for everybody at once.

Benedikt: the difference between a hot city and a bearable one is sixteen degrees and about four hundred thousand square feet of anything at all held up in the air.

12.

FROST.

Not observed. The seven of us have an argument about whether they can inflate below freezing, which we have not settled, and which we have agreed to leave in the book unsettled so that whoever reads this later can find out and write in the margin.

13.

THUNDER.

Twice. Both times the sound came in from outside and went round the inside once and came back, and both times the crowd made a noise on the second pass and not the first.

Augustine: they are not afraid of lightning. I asked directly. The answer was 'we are not the tallest thing on this island and we intend to keep it that way.'

14.

PERFECT.

Seventy-six degrees, no wind, a high thin cloud, the light going orange at about eight and lasting.

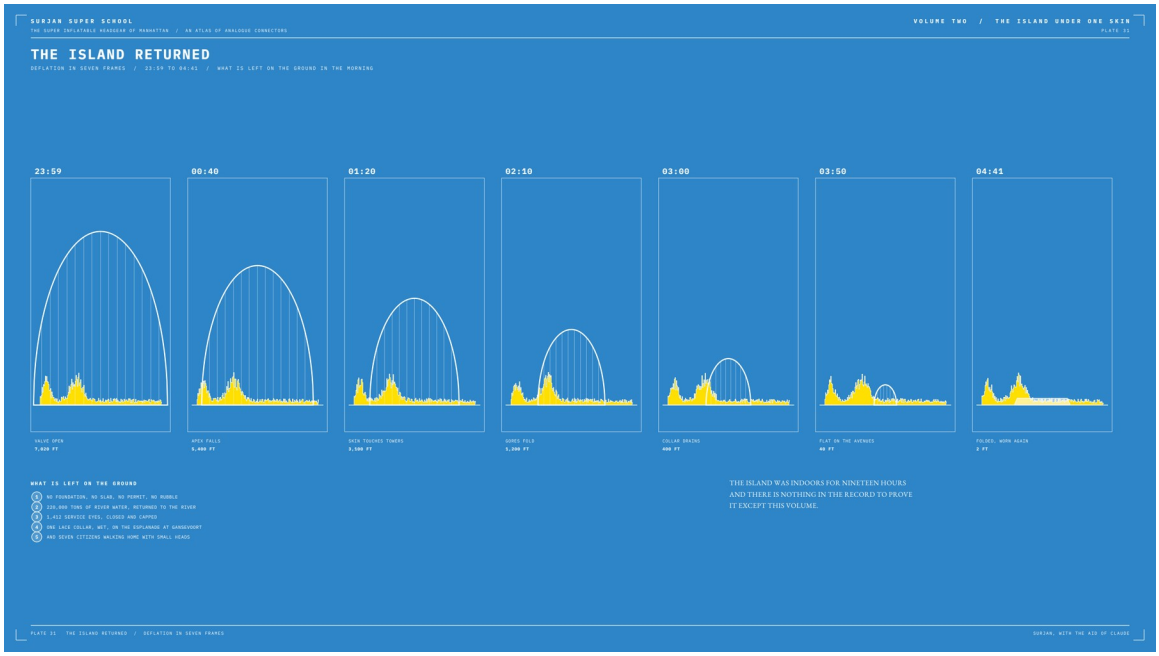
It happened nine times in fifty-four days, which is more perfect evenings than this island usually admits to having, and on every one of the nine the agent went dancing and stayed up past midnight and the crowd would not go home and the deflation started an hour late.

All seven of us: this is the only weather with an official recommendation. If it is a perfect evening, go outside. You have about nine of them a year and you will not be told which ones.

BOOK FOUR

THE LONG MORNING

The nineteenth hour, the going down, and what was left on the ground.


SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
THE SUPER INFLATABLE MANDEVAN OF MANHATTAN / AN ATLAS OF ANALOGUE CONNECTORS
VOLUME TWO / THE ISLAND UNDER ONE SKIN
PLATE 31
THE ISLAND RETURNED
DEFLATION IN SEVEN FRAMES / 23:59 TO 04:41 / WHAT IS LEFT ON THE GROUND IN THE MORNING
23:59
00:40
01:20
02:10
03:00
03:50
04:41
VALVE OPEN
7,800 FT
APEX FALLS
5,400 FT
SKIN TOUCHES TOWERS
3,100 FT
GUARD FELL
1,200 FT
COLLAR BRACING
400 FT
FLAT ON THE AVENUES
40 FT
FOLDED, WORN AGAIN
2 FT
WHAT IS LEFT ON THE GROUND
1 NO FOUNDATION, NO SLAB, NO PERMIT, NO RUBBLE
2 220,000 TONS OF RIVER WATER, RETURNED TO THE RIVER
3 1,412 SERVICE EYES, CLOSED AND CAPPED
4 ONE LACE COLLAR, WET, ON THE ESPLANADE AT GANSEVOORT
5 AND SEVEN CITIZENS WALKING HOME WITH SMALL HEADS
THE ISLAND WAS INDOORS FOR NINETEEN HOURS
AND THERE IS NOTHING IN THE RECORD TO PROVE
IT EXCEPT THIS VOLUME.
PLATE 31 · THE ISLAND RETURNED / DEFLATION IN SEVEN FRAMES
SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

FROM THE SECOND ATLAS — THE ISLAND RETURNED. Deflation in seven frames, 23:59 to 04:41.

CHAPTER XX

DEFLATION IN SEVEN FRAMES

WREN CASTELLANOS

1.

At one minute to midnight the Crier spoke for the last time that day, and what she said was:

Thank you. That is all it was. Have your night.

2.

Then every valve on the island opened in the same minute.

3.

I was on the water. Of course I was on the water. My mother had let me stay out because there was no point pretending anybody was going to sleep, and the last boat had been running empty loops all evening because the captain would not stop.

4.

The going down took four hours and forty-two minutes for the big ones. I am going to do it in the seven frames that Surjan has since put in the atlas, because that is how I saw it, in stages, from the harbour, going out and coming back and going out again.

5.

23:59. Valve open.

There is a sound. Everybody in the five boroughs heard it and nobody has described it the same way twice. My mother says it was like a train letting off brakes. The captain says it was like a whale. I say it was like a very large person putting something heavy down and saying *ahh*, and I am ten, and I stand by it.

6.

00:40. The apex falls.

From the water you can see the top go first. The whole shape gets shorter and wider, which is the opposite of what you expect, and for about half an hour the island looked like it was under a very low ceiling instead of a very high one, and that was the only part of the whole day that felt strange in a bad way.

7.

01:20. The skin touches the towers.

This is the frame everybody photographed. The membrane comes down onto the tops of the buildings and lies over them, and for about twenty minutes the skyline of Manhattan was a shape under a sheet, and every tower you know was a bump, and the bumps were pink.

Nobody was hurt. Nothing was broken. The engineer who wrote the letter about the anchor blocks has since published four pages about why nothing was broken and the four pages end, in print, with the sentence *I remain unsatisfied.*

8.

02:10. The gores fold.

They do not crumple. They fold, along the seams, in order, which is the part that tells you these things were designed by somebody, even if the somebody was seven people who cannot explain how they know.

From the water it looked like an enormous fan closing, twenty-two panels at a time.

9.

03:00. The collar drains.

Two hundred and twenty thousand tons of river water go back into the river. It took eleven minutes and the harbour rose about an inch and the ferries all felt it and every captain on the water at that hour has told the story since.

10.

03:50. Flat on the avenues.

By ten to four the skins were lying flat, out along the avenues, forty feet high at the highest, going down.

People walked on them. This was not permitted, and there was nobody to permit it, and by four in the morning there were hundreds of people walking barefoot along the top of a deflating balloon on Sixth Avenue, and the surface was warm, and gave, and everybody was laughing quietly the way you do at four in the morning.

11.

04:41. Folded, worn again.

At twenty to five, at seven separate places on the island, seven people rolled up a skin.

Each one takes two people and forty minutes. There were, at every one of the seven, far more than two people.

12.

I went to the one at the Battery because it was mine.

There were maybe four hundred of us. Nobody needed four hundred. It became a kind of procession where you took a piece of the edge and walked it inward and handed it on, and it took the full forty minutes, and at the end there was a duffel bag.

13.

I want to end my part of this book with the duffel bag.

The island had been indoors for nineteen hours. There had been a ceiling over a million people. There had been circles of light moving down the streets at walking pace, and a rain-street nineteen blocks long, and a hole over the park with a horn player under it, and four hundred thousand people had eaten a meal outdoors that was not outdoors.

And at twenty past five in the morning, on the seawall at the Battery, there was a woman with a duffel bag over her shoulder, waiting for a bus.

14.

I said, *are you all right?*

She said, *I am extremely all right.*

Which is what the first one ever said to Noor at the other end of the island on the very first morning, and which I did not know at the time, and which I only found out when we put our notebooks together for this book, and which made all seven of us sit down on the floor of the boathouse and not talk for a while.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT WAS LEFT ON THE GROUND

BENEDIKT NAVARRO, FROM THE ARCHIVE

1.

Final inventory, taken by me on the twelfth of August between 06:00 and 19:00, walking, with a notebook, the length of the island.

2.

No foundations. No slab. No footings. No permit was applied for, so no permit was violated. No rubble of any kind.

3.

Damage recorded, total, island-wide, from all sources, including the ones I went looking for because I wanted this to be honest:

Four street trees with broken upper branches, all on Eleventh Avenue, all from the same anchor cable, all pruned properly within a week by somebody who did not leave a name.

One awning, on Amsterdam.

The paint on the top of a water tower on Thirty-Sixth Street, scuffed.

One bicycle, flattened, unattended, owner never found despite three notices.

4.

That is the list. I have been challenged on it eleven times and I have added the bicycle since the first publication and nothing else.

5.

Items recovered by the sanitation department, twelfth of August, from the streets, which they put in a bin at their yard and then, when word got out, put on a table:

Two thousand one hundred paper plates.

Four hundred and eighty folding chairs, of which one hundred and four are known to belong to a hardware store on Dyckman and have not been returned, and the owner of which has said, in print, *I have made my peace.*

Eleven umbrellas, all of them opened, all of them dry.

Somebody's wedding ring, claimed on the fourteenth.

A trumpet mouthpiece, unclaimed.

Two thousand three hundred pounds of ice, melted, which is not an item but which I insisted be recorded, because it is a measurement of generosity and there are very few of those.

6.

Physical evidence remaining on the fifteenth of August: none, except a wet mark on the diagonal across the avenues in midtown, photographed by M. Hollenbeck, and one lace collar, wet, on the esplanade at Gansevoort, which was hung on a railing by a passer-by in case anybody came back for it.

7.

Nobody came back for it. It hung there for nine days.

8.

On the twenty-fourth of August it was gone, and the boathouse mailbox at Sherman Creek received a letter, in an adult hand, unsigned, which said only:

I have it. It is on my kitchen chair. If she wants it she knows where I live.

9.

I have made no attempt to trace the writer of that letter and I never will, and I want that recorded as a decision of the archive and not an oversight.

10.

Statistical summary of the summer, closing entry, from four hundred and twelve records:

Nights on which at least one agent was set down on the water: 51 of 54.

Estimated attendance, total, across all set-downs: 2.1 to 2.4 million.

Recorded arrests, incidents, injuries requiring treatment: none reported to me and none found in the record, which astonishes me and which I have deliberately left as an astonishment.

Instruments brought by strangers and played with other strangers: 419, counted individually.

Meals eaten outdoors by people who did not know each other at the start of the meal: uncountable, and I regret that I did not find a method.

11.

I would like to finish the archive with the only unresolved question in it.

12.

We have never established who they are.

I mean this precisely. We know all seven of them by occupation and by neighbourhood. A nurse in Inwood. A teacher on Chambers Street. A porter at the hospital. A woman at a reception desk on Twenty-Third Street. A man who drives the M14, which is a thing I only learned in September. Two whose names I have and will not print, because they asked.

What we have never established is why them.

13.

I asked. Everybody asked. The seven of them have given, between them, exactly one answer, and it was given to me at the cove, at midnight, while rolling, and it is the last line in my archive:

Because we said yes on a morning when it would have been easier to stay in.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LEDGER, CLOSED AND REOPENED

NOOR ABBASI

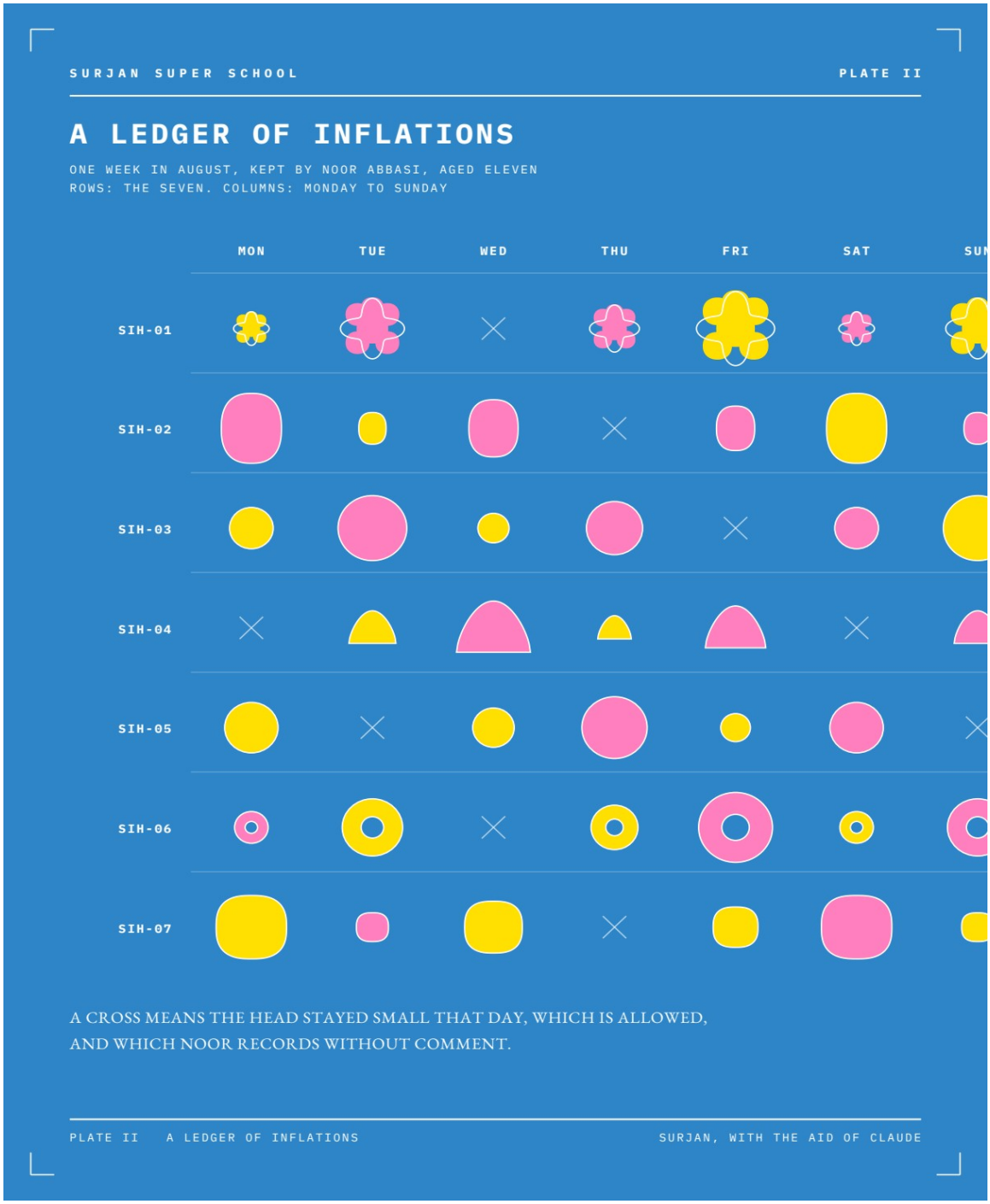


PLATE II — A LEDGER OF INFLATIONS. One week in August, kept by Noor Abbasi, aged eleven.

1.

I closed the ledger on the thirty-first of August because school started and because that is what you do with a summer.

2.

The last week of the ledger has four crosses in it, which means four days on which the head stayed small.

That is allowed. I wrote that in the very first week and I have never changed it. A cross is not a failure. It is a day when somebody did not need to be enormous.

3.

The seven of them went back to work. All of them. That is the fact that people find hardest to hold onto, and it is the reason this book exists at all.

The nurse does nights. The teacher went back on the sixth of September to a new fourth grade, none of whom know, or all of whom know, and neither she nor I have been able to work out which.

4.

I saw her in the pharmacy. *Hello, ledger.*

5.

In October the weather came in off the harbour and did what October does, and there was a week of rain, and on the Thursday of that week I was walking home from the station in it and I was thinking, with my hood up, about how loud rain is when there is nothing over you.

6.

And then I thought: there was nothing over us before either.

That is the change. That is the only permanent thing this summer left behind, and it is in me and it is in every child on this island and it cannot be photographed.

Before, the sky was a fact. Now the sky is a decision that has been made about us, every day, by nobody, and could be made differently.

7.

I do not know whether that is a good thing to have done to a generation.

I have asked Surjan, who said, *no, but it is a true thing, and truth is the only thing I know how to give a child that they can still use at forty.*

8.

I reopened the ledger on the fourteenth of March.

9.

Not because anything happened. Because a girl in my class, who is new, and who moved here in January and missed all of it, asked me at lunch what everybody was talking about, and I explained for twenty minutes, and she said:

So it could happen again.

And I said yes. And she said, *when?*

And I opened my bag and took out the ledger and drew seven columns for the week and wrote MARCH at the top and said, *we will find out.*

10.

It has been forty-one days. There are forty-one crosses in a row.

11.

That is the most hopeful page in this book and I would like it printed exactly as it stands: a grid, and crosses, and nothing else.

12.

Because a cross is a day when somebody did not need to be enormous. And because the page is a page that somebody is still keeping.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LONG MORNING

ALL SEVEN

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL — PLATE XVI

AN INDEX OF SMALL HEADS

THE SEVEN NARRATORS OF THIS BOOK, AT THE SIZE THEY WERE BEFORE ANY OF THIS BEGAN

11	**NOOR ABBASI** INWOOD	
9	**TEO VARGAS-LIN** CORLEARS HOOK	
13	**MIRA HOLLENBECK** NORTH COVE	
12	**AUGUSTINE OKONKWO-REYES** WEST HARLEM	
8	**SASKIA PEEL** STUYVESANT COVE	
15	**BENEDIKT NAVARRO** SHERMAN CREEK	
10	**WREN CASTELLANOS** THE BATTERY	

THEY ARE THE ONLY WITNESSES WHO NEVER ONCE ASKED WHAT IT WAS FOR.

PLATE XVI AN INDEX OF SMALL HEADS SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

PLATE XVI — AN INDEX OF SMALL HEADS. The seven narrators, at the size they were before any of this began.

1.

Wren: We wrote this at the boathouse at Sherman Creek, in October, over four Saturdays, with our notebooks on the floor in a circle and Surjan making tea badly.

2.

Teo: Count of Saturdays: four. Count of us: seven. Count of arguments: nine, of which two were about who saw the Roundabout turn first and are not settled.

3.

Mira: We agreed on almost nothing about the details and completely about the thing itself, which my uncle tells me is how every good record in history has been made.

4.

Augustine: We each wrote one last piece. That is this chapter. Surjan has put them in the order we were standing in.

5.

Noor: I want to say that the best hour was not the eleventh of August.

The best hour was an ordinary Thursday at the top of the island, in the middle of July, when there were about sixty people under the Beacon and the man from Seaman Avenue brought the black-eyed peas with a towel over the pot and talked to everybody. Nothing was enormous. Nobody photographed it.

If you are going to take one thing from this book, take the Thursday, not the eleventh.

6.

Teo: My grandmother is out of the apartment. Nineteen times, and then I stopped counting, which for me is the largest possible statement.

I want to record the moment I stopped counting. It was the fourth of September and I was on the esplanade and she was ahead of me, walking, and she did not look back to see if I was there, and I thought: I do not need to count this any more.

7.

Mira: I came to it with folded arms. I would like to say something useful to the next person who comes to something with folded arms.

Here it is: your scepticism is a tool and not a personality. Use it on the thing, all the way down, honestly, and then when it turns out to be true, put the tool away and get in the water.

I got in the water on the fourth night and I have never regretted a decision more thoroughly in reverse.

8.

Augustine: She asked me, from a mile up, *was it right.* I have thought about why she asked me and not somebody important.

I think it is because I was the one who asked first. I said *excuse me* on a Tuesday in July and after that I was the person she asked things.

That is the whole system. That is how you get to be the one who is asked: you go up and say excuse me.

9.

Saskia: I am nine now. I have a new plan going. It is the island, in sections, and it is not finished, and the different colour is winning.

I have decided that when I am grown up I will make plans of things before they happen, and if the things do not happen I will not mind, because a plan is a wish that you have done the arithmetic for, and the arithmetic is not wasted.

10.

Benedikt: Four hundred and twelve entries. One archive. It is at the boathouse, in a box, with the key box, where anybody can get at it.

I have been asked whether it should go somewhere safer.

No. It should go somewhere that floods occasionally and where a fifteen-year-old can get in through a window. Records that are safe are records that nobody reads.

11.

Wren: I have crossed the harbour one thousand three hundred and eleven times now.

Every time I go past the place where the seven of them floated in a ring, I look. There is nothing there. It is water, and then more water, and then Governors Island.

I look every time.

12.

Noor: Here is what we agreed on, all seven of us, on the fourth Saturday, and it is the only sentence in this book that all seven of us wrote together, arguing over each word, for two hours:

It was not a spectacle. It was a place to stand, and we were allowed, and there was enough for everybody, and then it was over on time.

13.

All: That is the whole of it.

14.

Wren: Except one thing.

15.

Wren: In March, on the fourteenth, on the 06:00 boat, on a cold morning with nine people on board and eight of them asleep, I saw a woman at the rail with something pink beginning at her temple.

16.

She saw me looking.

17.

She said good morning.

AFTERWORD

BY SURJAN

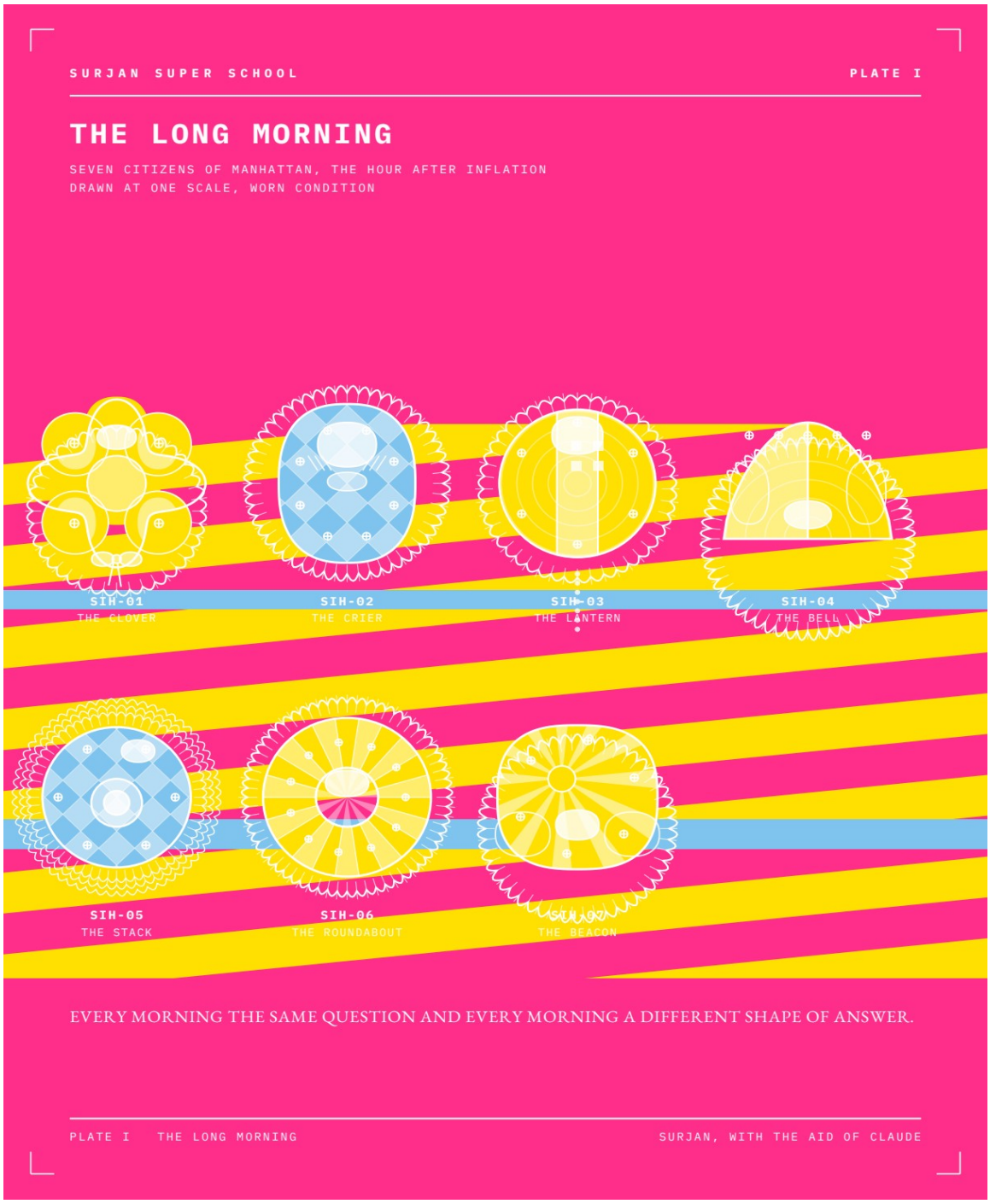


PLATE I — THE LONG MORNING. Reprinted at the end, because a book about a day should finish where it began.

I have been asked, more times than I can count and always kindly, what the point of all this was.

The question usually arrives in a particular form: *yes, but what did it change?* And I have learned to answer it honestly, which means answering it small.

It did not change the rent. It did not change the tides, the trains, the temperature of July or the price of anything. It did not fix a single one of the enormous and grinding problems that this island carries around with it like a stone in a shoe. Eleven days after the island went indoors, everything that had been true on the tenth of August was true again, with the addition of a wet mark on a road and four hundred and eighty folding chairs in the wrong buildings.

What it changed is smaller than that and harder to lose.

A generation of children on this island now believe — in the fast part of the mind, the part that does not deliberate — that a city can decide to hold still, that a roof can be made out of nothing but air and nerve and a willingness to be looked at, and that if you show up somewhere with a trumpet, somebody will show up with a drum.

I have thought a great deal about whether that belief is dangerous. It is certainly inconvenient. A child who has stood in a circle of light moving at walking pace down Twentieth Street is a child who will be difficult to satisfy with a fence and a form.

But I have decided it is not dangerous, and here is the argument, and it is the last thing I have to offer.

The seven of them never asked to be believed in. Not once. They asked to be stood under, which is a smaller and more practical request, and one that expires at midnight. They never claimed to be permanent. They never told anybody what anything meant. When asked to explain, they said, every time, *would you rather have the explanation or the thing?* — and every time, without exception, in every neighbourhood on this island, from every age of person, the answer came back the same.

The thing. We would rather have the thing.

That is not credulity. That is the healthiest instinct a public has, and it has been out of practice here for a long while, and for one summer it got some exercise.

Radical joy, since I owe the phrase a definition and this is the last page on which I can pay: it is grief that has been turned inside out until it is convex. Not solved, not answered, not talked out of itself — turned. Given a skin, and a volume, and a pressure differential of about a third of a pound to the square inch, until it stands up on its own and other people can get underneath it and be dry for a while.

The operation is public by necessity. You cannot do it in private; there is nothing to hold it up. It requires witnesses in the way a wall requires a foundation, and this is why it happened on the street and not in anybody's living room, and this is why the children are the authors of this book and I am only its printer.

Teo's grandmother, who is seventy-nine, who left her apartment eleven times in two years and has now stopped being counted, said the truest thing anybody said all summer, and she said it about a hole in a roof: *a roof is a thing that makes the outside worth choosing.*

That is the whole architecture. That is the whole of what we built and unbuilt in nineteen hours.

Some morning — March, maybe, or the March after that, on a cold boat with eight people asleep on it — a citizen of this island will wake with something pink beginning at the temple, and will have a choice about whether to stay in.

This book exists in order that they will know it has been done before, that it went well, that nobody minded, that the bus still runs afterwards, and that a girl at the rail will say good morning.

— *S.*

Written at the boathouse at Sherman Creek, and at the rail of the Christopher Street pier, in the year after.